



**Sandra Cristina Reis
Marques de Oliveira**

**Representações da Juventude Americana no
Cinema de Hollywood da Década de Oitenta**

**Representations of American Youth in Hollywood
Film in the 1980s**

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Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas, variante de Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Prof. Dr. Anthony David Barker, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro.

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Palavras-chave**adolescentes, América, década de 80, Hollywood, filme, estereótipos****Resumo**

O presente trabalho propõe-se examinar diferentes representações da adolescência no cinema de Hollywood, particularmente na década de 80. Esta dissertação inicia a sua análise debruçando-se sobre as representações da adolescência no cinema de Hollywood, no período após a II Guerra Mundial, numa tentativa de determinar alguns acontecimentos que afectaram a forma como essas representações evoluíram até ao final da década de 80. Finalmente, uma reflexão sobre os aspectos mais relevantes das representações da adolescência no cinema na época conservadora de Ronald Reagan.

Keywords

adolescents, America, the 1980s, Hollywood, film, stereotypes

Abstract

This present study aims to examine different representations of American youth in Hollywood film, particularly in the 1980s. This dissertation begins with an examination of some representations of American youth after World War II in an attempt to investigate the trends which affected its representations and how they have evolved from then until the end of the 1980s. Finally, it offers some detailed reflections on depictions of adolescence in Hollywood film during the Reagan years.

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Introduction

Adolescence and Hollywood have recently had and will continue to have a close relationship. In the early days of Hollywood, after the Great Depression, optimistic fables starring young actors such as Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney presented the audience with positive representations of youth. The eliding of the boundaries of adolescence has been a common practice in Hollywood film production since its beginnings. Actresses and actors like Garland and Rooney impersonated characters that were often younger than themselves, sometimes the age difference between actor and character was significant; when Judy Garland starred in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) she was already 17 years old. The films these young stars appeared in were directed at an audience of the time which included men, women and children – moviegoing was considered a family leisure activity and that meant different generations watching the same movie. This situation did not suffer significant changes until television entered the American home.

The mid-1950s introduced a new philosophy in Hollywood film-making; Hollywood had to attract those who despite television would still go out in the evening to entertain themselves, and thus proved to be the largest age group in America – teenagers. In order to do this, Hollywood productions started depicting a wider range of moral issues, which were designed to attract younger people to cinemas where they could view more “adult” dramas than the ones available on television. Moreover, the dismantling of Hollywood’s studio system permitted smaller studios to gain access to more screens allowing a wider variety of performances and stories, which appealed to teenagers. In fact, these changes in the industry and in society brought along other changes which reflected how American society was shaping itself. Timothy Shary, in *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary Cinema*, writes:

Then with the resolution of World War II, a distinct population in America began to emerge: teenagers. Gradually the age between childhood and adulthood came to be codified, debated, celebrated, and perhaps most significantly, elongated. More young people stayed in school, and with the arrival of postwar prosperity, more began attending college. Other factors contributed to the burgeoning presence of the teenager in the 1950’s: the greater availability of automobiles, which allowed youth to travel and thus achieve a certain independence; the recovering economy, which gave many teens extra money for entertainment outside the home; the popular reception of rock and roll music, which clearly flew in the face of previous standards;

and the influence of television, which, while giving all Americans a new common entertainment medium, also kept more adults at home. (p.3-4)

Relevant to this study is the fact that the adolescent years, between childhood and adulthood, underwent deep transformations during and after the World War II. By the end of World War II teenagers became a highly visible age group and many moral panics in American society were related to the ongoing social transformations initiated during and after the war years. Moral panics related to rock and roll music and juvenile delinquency were in many cases overreactions to the natural process of economic and social change.

A straightforward definition for this age group is not simple. It depends upon one's standpoint and area of knowledge (anthropological, biological, psychological or sociological). It can range from 12 to 22 years old. This represents a range that comprises the beginning of junior high school to late adolescence and admission into the post-high school world of young adults. For the purpose of my study I will consider films produced in Hollywood in the 1980s which focus on teenagers between the ages of 14 and 20. This represents a range that comprises the beginning of high school to late adolescence and admission into the post-high school world of young adults and work. As the field is vast, I will merely concentrate my attentions in films of the 1980s.

As I have said, this study will analyse youth representations in Hollywood film productions during the 1980s as well as the issues and trends that these representations raise and reflect. The last century was prolific in "moral panics" around young people and social behaviour and the cinema has been a regular place where these panics are ventilated. Associated with these moral panics were some Hollywood exploitation productions of the late 1950s: they had controversial contents (commonly juvenile delinquency, rock and roll, etc.) and were targeted at teenagers. The development of youth culture, especially after World War II and how it is reflected in Hollywood's production schedules has a particular relevance for this study due to the evident changes in family structures, parents' roles, moral standards and social behaviour. Teen films, viewed as an important sub-genre, indicate adolescent trends and cultural attitudes about youth. Jon Lewis in *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* writes:

The astonishing emergence of youth culture after the Second World War (as a distinct, moneyed, seemingly homogeneous subculture with its own set of rituals and practices) prompted an immediate response from the

burgeoning postwar consumer-leisure industry. Just as sociologists and cultural historians began talking about the phenomenon of youth culture, the advertising, recording, television and movie industries took aim at this new target market. Today, in order to study youth culture adequately, we must focus on the essential paradox of youth as both mass movement and mass market.

Such a paradox characterizes the production and reception of the teen film – works that provide youth with a wealth of substantive images and representation(s) of their lives that to a large extent originate from outside the teen experience. These films provide at best the principal artifacts of youth culture; at worst, they offer proof positive of the hegemonic effect of “the culture industry” (the argument that the media not only produce texts for consumption, but ideology for consumption as well; the argument that culture is yet another product of postwar industry). Given such dialectic, one cannot study culture without attending to the re-presentations of that culture in the media. (p. 3)

The theoretical concept of representation argues that media texts are constructions; they represent the “world” to the audience. Any media text, and that includes film, is a mediation, an interpretation of the world, produced for a variety of artistic, economic and social reasons. Representations rely on the shared recognition of ideas, groups or places. However there can be major disagreement on the interpretation of representations and it is the analysis of how and why these representations are constructed and received that is important for this study. One of the reasons for the importance of representations is that they may exercise influence over people at different levels like, for example, how people think about a particular group like teenagers. How social groups are treated in cultural representations can have a bearing on how they are treated in real life. The representation of poverty, self-hate, harassment and discrimination are assimilated and instituted by diverse media products and have consequences in how these things are addressed in the social arena.

In this study I will argue that the teen genre of the 1980s served up its audiences with a multitude of representations of what it was to be a teenager during that period, with the purpose of attracting teenagers to cinemas and ‘selling’ them trends and products. Most Hollywood’s productions of the genre did not question what it meant to be a teenager, but provided teenagers with representations whose purpose was to validate the *status quo* and to quieten teenagers down. An example of this is the way most endings, or resolutions, of this popular genre explain everything. In most 1980s teen films there is little space for

questioning society or a teenagers' place in it. In short, Hollywood mainstream productions of teen films in the 1980s were part of a system which did not illustrate the wide variety of American society but mostly portrayed the white middle classes and their suburban lifestyle.

My thesis, the evidence for which is greater than I can present here, will offer, in the first chapter, a brief historical contextualization of the representation of teenagers in Hollywood up until the end of the 1970s. The second chapter discusses Hollywood's teen productions of the 1980s and the emergence of the genre (between 1980 and 1989 around 450 films about youth and featuring teenagers between 12 and 20 years old were released (in cinemas or straight-to-video) ¹ Some considerations on Hollywood and its genre system will be offered. I will then look at various different teen experiences on film during the 1980s with special emphasis on school-related films, as well as the depiction of teenagers in horror films. The relevance of the Brat Pack will also be discussed in that chapter. The fourth chapter offers an analysis of the representations found in the film *The Breakfast Club*. The fifth chapter offers an analysis of the representations conveyed by the film *St. Elmo's Fire*. Finally, the conclusion reviews the most important aspects of the teenpic looks at why it became so influential in the mid 1980s, and then reflects on some sense of its social impact.

¹ *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*, 2002 (p. 265)

Chapter I

Representations of Teenagers on Film: A Brief Historical Contextualisation

1. Teenagers on Film – the Background

There have been teenagers on screen since the early stages of cinema, but it was only the 1950s that gave teenagers a far more prominent role in film. Before the 1950s the representations of adolescence on Hollywood film were quite serene. A typical example for that can be found in Fredric March's two teenage children in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), who never seem to have disagreed or challenged their parents. It was not in the 1950s that teenagers appeared in the big screen for the first time, but there are some very significant films from the 1950s and later which deal with the lives of teenagers in isolation and with the identification of adolescence as a problem time to which audience teenagers could relate, and which to some extent still help to form a part of the idea of what it is to be a teenager both in the USA and outside it.

Teenagers and youth in general became a national issue both in the United States and in the United Kingdom after the Second World War since they began to constitute the largest age group in both countries. That fact alone made them more noticeable than ever before. During the Second World War teenagers were involved in the war effort; German, French and British under-age-army adolescents suffered bombs, forced labour and other horrors of war; whereas American teens had to make their way in a continent destabilized by war fever and mass migration, so many quit school and went out to work. The social definition of adolescent changed from the Depression-era imperative of staying in school and out of the labour market to the state's promotion of full employment during the Second World War. Pre-army-age youngsters had a social and economic importance that they never had before, in a time when eighteen-to-thirty-year-olds men were temporarily removed from the domestic labour market. American teenagers lived conditioned to the likelihood that they would soon have to join in the fighting, but felt confident about their incomes, which were an average of ten dollars per week. This unparalleled visibility attracted adult criticism and renewed calls for controls. The press reports of delinquency in big cities around 1942 made local authorities respond with the introduction of 10 p.m. curfews for non-working youths under seventeen, which brought greater amounts of juveniles into the crime statistics. The curfews were very unpopular among teenagers who expressed their disapproval, as they felt their lives were being controlled unnecessarily,

since they had been earning their place in society through work and by joining the war effort.

Pearl Harbour was a milestone in America's history and after it the country's industrial commitment to the war effort became unstoppable. Millions of jobs were created, millions of men were mobilized and millions of people moved from their homes to the war industries in the West and Southwest. Mass production asserted itself as the economy's driving motor. Children, adolescents and young women predominantly were exposed to the changes set off by the mass migration and industrial boom. 6.5 million women entered the labour force during the last four war years, of the war which made childcare themselves an enormous social problem. Reports from social workers during that period refer to children left in cars in parks, locked in at home, others locked out and children sitting in the movies, watching the same movie repeatedly until their mothers could come and pick them up. Interestingly public places of entertainment, especially cinemas, became *de facto* child-minders for that period.

The young GIs were also subject to the ongoing changes in society. The armed forces discharged thousands of these young soldiers on leave or on weekend furlough into cities and towns close to army bases or embarkation points. The downtowns of these areas became a bustling environment exposed to mass displays of high spirits; they were full of peep shows, burlesque theatres, and fleapit cinemas showing exploitation films with lurid posters. The so-called exploitation films catered to their target audience by presenting exotic or controversial contents. The typical features of exploitation films were controversial contents, low-budgets and demographic targeting. In this way the massing crowds of young GI were attracted to the fleapits. Their drunkenness and violence were tolerated and this *carpe diem* psychology reaffirmed the soldier's adolescent status on the brink of adult duties. Sexual drives were fairly up-front and as soon as the GI was off duty, he felt free to release his impulses and feelings. Before shipping out, the GI was a stranger in a strange land. By the second year of the war, the pressure of the large number of armed forces waiting to be shipped out on the cities to which migrants of all hues lived lead to tensions and in some cases riots. According to Jon Savage in *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*:

During 1943, American adolescents seemed to go crazy. Gangs of young hoodlums terrorized New York City. In the streets of Indianapolis,

slum gangs called the North Side Dukes and the Rinky Dinks held pitched battles in the streets and vandalized cinemas and streetcars. A Massachusetts boy and girl killed a man for 48 cents. Middle-class children disrupted high school events, showed a lack of respect for their teachers, and acted noisily in restaurants and drive-ins. In one extreme case, a thirteen-year-old boy attempted to dynamite a railway line in a bid to become the local “dictator.”(p.402)

America was also shocked with the behaviour of some adolescent girls. The prominence of women in American life had already attracted adverse attention with the scandals about lax working mothers; then their younger siblings came under scrutiny. The problem of adolescent sexual delinquency (of a non-commercial character) was rising and considered to be a nationwide problem. The popular expression for these so called delinquent girls was Victory Girls; their *modus operandi* was summarized in a National Recreation Association pamphlet of 1943, Savage writes:

“they walk down city streets, six or seven abreast, breaking as they pass civilians, but holding on to each other’s arms as they approach a soldier or a sailor, forming a very flattering net around him. As the walk progresses, the line gets shorter and shorter, as girl and boy pair off and leave the group. It’s a childish, very effective get-your-man plan used by girls around fourteen and fifteen years old.” Apparently these girls were responding to the war time period in their own way, they were too young to work in factories or join the war effort (armed forces) and without a part to play they felt a persistent sense of frustration. Furthermore, the disappearance of male contemporaries deprived them from developing a “healthy” interest in boys their own age, making them become blatant uniform chasers. (p.404)



Figure 1. Victory Girls, New York

Keeping teenagers under control became a national priority from the middle of the 1940's onwards; parents received some support from community leaders and from local and national law-enforcement agencies. Public-school teachers also did their part with the help of a pioneering new teaching tool that combined a popular form of entertainment with a little military expertise. Educational films were being screened on a regular basis in classrooms through out the country. These educational films were produced far from the glitter of Hollywood; they had an approximated length of ten to thirteen minutes and their objective was to teach their young audiences the difference between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The typical film was about a teenager problem or issue, which would be solved by a change in the teenager's attitude or behaviour. *Johnny Learns His Manners* (1946), *Mind Your Manners* (1953), *Habit Patterns* (1954) were some of the films that were designed to help teachers to convey and promote so-called mainstream values in an appealing way to a mass audience who had to attend school. This method of "programming" America's youth was borrowed from the propaganda films used by the United States military during the war years. Training films used during that period by the military proved to be an effective and cost-efficient way to educate the troops about war, prepare them for battle and improve their moral. The common purpose of the propaganda classroom and military films was to influence their intended audiences. The educational or social-guidance movies addressed some serious problems, like alcohol and drug abuse, driving safety or juvenile delinquency. The information provided was not necessarily accurate since these films regularly took a sensationalistic approach to their topics, with which they induced fear in the audience and so made it submit to these so-called mainstream values. Adults in general, but more specifically parents and teachers, were in this way provided with a means to exercise some control over teenagers in a less threatening and potentially entertaining way. Interestingly, a film like *How to Say No: Moral Maturity* (1951) might have been the source of inspiration for the "Just Say No" campaign directed by Nancy Reagan in the 1980's. The film is a story telling teenagers to just say "no" to alcohol, cigarettes, and heavy petting, in much the same way as Nancy Reagan's campaign aimed at preventing youth from turning to drug use and in a more veiled way defended chastity before marriage.

2. Hollywood and the Early Stages of Teen Cinema since the 1950s

The 1950s

Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) produced in James Dean an icon of doomed youth that will probably last as long as the movies do (it has certainly been one of Hollywood's most enduring myths to date), and will always be echoed whenever pretty young people slick down their hair, wear a leather jacket and affect to be depressed or dissatisfied. The films in which the 24-year-old Dean appeared - but most especially *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* in which he played a teenager as such - are the prehistory from which the teen genre evolved. *Rebel Without a Cause* is a classic example of a movie about teenagers which continues to have resonance within the teen movie genre and has thus become a part of its essential vocabulary.



Figure 2. James Dean in
Rebel Without a Cause



Figure 3. *Rebel Without a Cause*

One of the reasons for this is that *Rebel Without a Cause*, like many films with teenagers in them, is a film that considers teenagers as a social problem to be understood and contained, rather than seeing the teen years as a transitory period to be enjoyed and celebrated. Films about juvenile delinquents, or the problems of inner-city schooling, are, quite centrally, about teenagers and often deployed teen styles of their time in a way that meant teenagers keen to be cool flocked to them to check their personal styles against what

Hollywood was offering. Ultimately, however, these originating films were felt to be too serious-minded – they were directed at forming opinions rather than styles. They were not bold for teenagers as consumers as broadly as subjects bold of understanding them.

A retrospective look at the historical reception and censorship of these landmark movies of the 1950s, like *Rebel Without a Cause*, Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1954) or Richard Brooks' *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), both in the USA and in Europe, clearly indicates that these films were subjected to a widespread public debate, including severe criticism and attempts to soften or control their content. These attempts ranged from distributors giving the movies more moralistic titles and making anticipatory cuts, to conservative actions by critics, religious organizations, and censorship boards. Some critics tried to diminish the movies' relevance to European audiences by characterizing their content as uniquely American, other critics pessimistically speculated that these movies might have a negative influence on young people and on the disintegration of harmonious family life, which, as seen before, was already changing at an unprecedented pace. All in all, American values were being questioned and associated with ideas of cultural and social decline. It was one of the earliest United States moral panics about youth. *Blackboard jungle* is described as a milestone by Stephen Tropiano in *Rebels and Chicks: a History of the Teen Movie*:

Blackboard Jungle was a box-office success thanks partly to the popularity of its theme song, "Rock Around the Clock", and the controversy it sparked in the United States and abroad. The film was banned by local censor boards in Memphis and Atlanta, where it deemed "immoral, obscene, [and] licentious." (Blackboard Jungle Banned", *New York Times*, 29 March 1955:33). Objections were also raised as to the depiction of a black student as the story's hero and the teenagers as rude and violent – behaviour which it was feared would be imitated by a young and impressionable audience.

The film also made headlines when the Venice Film Festival pulled it from its line-up after Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce deprecated the film for its negative portrayal of American Schools. MGM's Dore Schary accused Luce of "flagrant political censorship" and of hypocrisy for attempting to "hide the fact that there is a juvenile-delinquency problem in this country". (Thomas M. Pryor, "US Film Dropped at Fete in Venice", *Lowe Says Ambassador Luce Urged Committee to Erase Blackboard Jungle*", *New York Times*, 27 August 1955:9) (p. 50)

MGM and the makers of *Blackboard Jungle* undoubtedly predicted some of the controversy and negative criticism that would be levelled against them. The film's opening statement clarifies the filmmakers' and the studio's intentions:

We, in the United States, are fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our communities and to our faith in American youth.

Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency – its cause – and its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools.

The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem. It is in this spirit and with this faith that *Blackboard Jungle* is produced.



Figures 4. and 5. Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford) and Gregory Miller (Sidney Poitier) in *Blackboard Jungle*

The arrival of American movies on juvenile delinquency and the emergence of new youth subcultures (like the beatniks) had a major influence upon young people and younger film-makers in Europe. As Timothy Shary states in *Teen Movies: American Youth on Film*:

The “beatnik” culture (the “beat” ethos) characterized by moody poetry, hard drugs, night clubs and protesting the establishment – would be a significant foundation for the more angry youth of the later 1960s, and saw its cinematic genesis in such 1959 productions as *The Beat Generation*, *The Beatniks*, *Daddy-O*, and *The Rebel Set*. (p. 26)

Despite the critics' attempts to stop them, these movies inspired young people with concrete models on how to talk, dress, and behave. *Rebel Without a Cause* displayed the

high school outcast who could not fit in (while also considering alcoholism, dysfunctional family dynamics, petty crime, and in more concealed terms, homosexuality); *Blackboard Jungle* dramatized the potentially violent conditions of urban high schools and imaginatively introduced rock music to American cinema, giving rise to the teen “rock movie” that would become a subgenre from then on. Mark Robson’s *Peyton Place* (1957) also went on to demonstrate the supposed dangers of teenage sexuality. *Peyton Place*, a film made from what was at the time a scandalous bestseller, was one of the first films to reveal those nasty secrets of ‘ordinary people’. The film gives a picture of the underlying sex, frustration and violence, in short the turmoil under the placid surface of a small New England’s town.

Films with these approaches to the social issues that were important to young people helped to give shape to a new model of youth autonomy and rebellion. The criticism and debate on this type of film and on the works of directors like Richard Brooks and Nicholas Ray brought about a new group of young critics who recognized that a radically critical approach to society was lacking in Europe. Young French critics, like Truffaut, Godard, Kautsky, or Rohmer, who would soon start as filmmakers, praised US teenpics. With these American juvenile crime movies in mind, the emerging New Wave directors argued that the French film industry had forgotten to deal with contemporary problems and issues in relation to young people.

Films that address social problems generate, almost automatically, films which merely display them. Some films about teenagers were not so much “problem films” as “exploitation films”. The continuing tumults of the 1950s, like rock’n’roll and juvenile delinquency were sources of inspiration for several cycles of exploitation films. These teen exploitation films of the 1950s and early 1960s became a sequence of vehicles for rock singers. A paradigmatic example of what a film can do for a song is “Rock Around the Clock”. *Blackboard Jungle* won its place in the history of modern American music when its theme song “Rock Around the Clock” became the first rock’n’roll song to reach #1 in *Cash Box’s* music chart. Bill Haley and his Comets had first recorded the song back in 1954, but it only became popular when *Blackboard Jungle* premiered in 1955. “Rock Around the Clock” held the #1 for seven weeks and, over time became the best selling single with fifteen million records sold. Teenagers adopted it as their unofficial anthem since lyrics like “We’re gonna rock, rock, rock ‘til broad day light” were a declaration of

teenage defiance against curfew times and an attitude of rebellion toward the moral standards of the day. After the initial thrust *Blackboard Jungle* gave to “Rock Around the Clock”, it was its airplay at a national level that made of it a big hit. Moreover, the song helped to break through the self-imposed restrictions many radio stations around the United States had when playing songs considered “race music” (today known as “rhythm and blues”), which along with jazz, swing, folk, country and western, and pop, were part of rock’n’roll musical roots.

Then there was the association between rock’n’roll and juvenile delinquency, which was lodged in the minds of many people because “Rock Around the Clock” was the theme song for *Blackboard Jungle*. The press played an important role in establishing this connection, since many newspapers like the *New York Times* reported stories about the outbreak of violence that occurred around the world during and after the screenings of the film *Rock Around the Clock* (1956). The film used the song’s title to its advantage and is little more than a fictionalized account of the discovery of Bill Haley and His Comets. Sam Katzman, one of Hollywood’s best known low-budget producers of the era, was a master at taking a recent event and making a film out of it. He was famous for working fast and cost-effectively, so that when a film was released the subject matter was still popular or trendy. Such is the case with *Rock Around the Clock* Katzman started its production in mid-January 1956 and by the end of the month he had completed shooting it. *Teen-Age Crime Wave* (1955) is another good example of Katzman’s effectiveness. *Rock Around the Clock* was developed on the controversy caused by rock’n’roll and *Teen-Age Crime Wave* on the outbursts of juvenile delinquency.

Rock Around the Clock is one of many rock’n’roll-themed musicals released in the second half of the 1950s whose major selling points to teenage audiences were the records of some of the top recording artists like Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Little Richard and Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers. These films also featured Alan Freed, the Ohio disc jockey who coined the term “rock’n’roll” (from the 1947 song “We’re Gonna Rock, We’re Gonna Roll”) and became rock music’s leading advocate. He produced and appeared in several films, usually acting as a 1950s stage analogy of an MTV deejay introducing the individual performers and groups to the film’s teenage characters, who watch them perform live or at home on television.

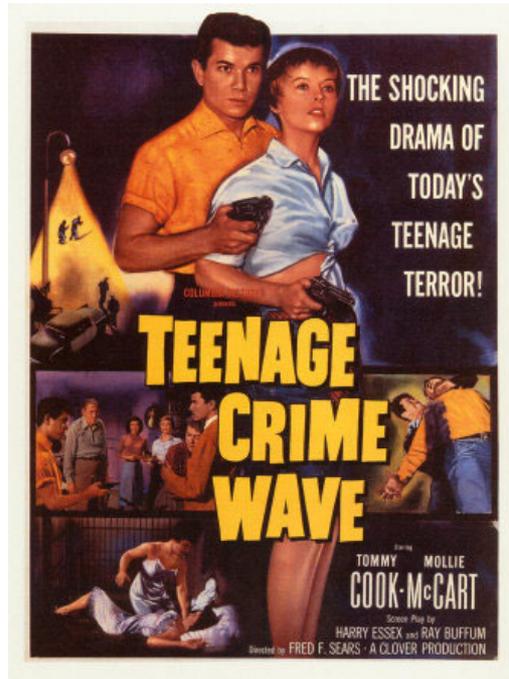


Figure 6. *Teenage Crime Wave* (1955)

The rock'n'roll movies of the 1950s did play a role in easing the tension that rock music was said to cause between the younger generations and the older generations. *Shake, Rattle and Rock* (1956) revolves around a small-town disc jockey who demands a public trial after a vigilante committee is set up to ban rock'n'roll. The film is quite an enjoyable exploitation movie in a familiar vein, notable for the performances of Joe Turner ("Lipstick, Powder and Paint") and Fats Domino ("Ain't That a Shame", "I'm in Love Again"). The number of rock'n'roll films produced in the 1950s proved that teenagers alone could prolong a box office hit. Consequently successful films marketed almost exclusively for teenagers pushed the industry toward the teenpics.



Figure 7. 1950's teens dancing to rock'n'roll

By the end of the 1950s more and more Americans bought homes and cars and moved to the suburbs. Teenagers, being the largest demographic group of Americans, benefited greatly from the new affluence. They began buying (or at least driving) cars too, which gave them a new sense of mobility and independence. With a car, they could travel to other towns, meet teens outside their school and find some privacy in lovers' lanes. With more money, Americans could afford the television sets desired by most households. With free entertainment at home, people stopped going to the cinema so often, and cinema attendance dropped dramatically between 1956 and 1959. Hollywood reacted by offering people what television could not offer: wider screens, bold colour, and more mature content. When these strategies failed to be attractive to mature audiences, the studios began appealing directly to the one group that was still going out to movies in large numbers: teenagers.

The 1960s

On the surface, teenagers of the early 1960s lived a relatively free existence on film. Money never seemed to be a problem and in their teenage world adolescents were immune from the social changes and political tensions around them – the Kennedy assassination, the cold war, the civil-rights movement. Controversial political content was not depicted in most Hollywood's productions of the first half of the 1960s. Parents'

absence from film was not problematic either, since the teenagers portrayed on film were every middle-class parents' dream. They did not smoke, nor drink, never broke the law or used drugs. These were the idyllic teenagers portrayed in such films as *Muscle Beach Party* (1964) and *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965) which were part of the beach-party musical cycle. In the second half of the 1960s, when the beach cycle came to the end, producers recognized that audiences could be more attracted to films that somehow reflected the wider and ongoing social changes, crises and adjustments of society.

The legalisation of the birth control pill was a major milestone in the second half of the 1960s. The birth control pill revolutionized contraception, giving women a sexual freedom they had never formerly known. Women who had access to the birth control pill had the freedom to engage in sex without being afraid of undesired pregnancy. The pill gave women a control over contraception they did not have until then and a transformed sense of control over their own borders. The sexual freedom made possible with the introduction of the pill soon changed the interaction between the sexes and promoted powerful social and sexual realignments. It brought female adolescent into a state of equal or superior intent to the male adolescent.

After 1965, American teenagers became more outspoken in such matters as questioning authority, speaking out against social injustice and rejecting their parents' materialistic and capitalistic views. The decline of parental and religious authority as well as the ready availability of contraception made the risk decline and the opportunities for premarital sex increase among teenagers. As a consequence of these social changes and in order to attract more teenagers to cinemas, the film industry started to be more explicit in its use of sex on screen. In the following years and in contrast to the celebration of the light-hearted aspects of being a teenager, the film industry began to portray a darker side of youth in films that further highlighted the dangers of teen delinquency and debauchery: *Teenage Strangler* (1964), *The Wild Angels* (1966) and Bogdanovich's *Targets* (1968). *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) is also considered a landmark film of the late 1960s since it broke some taboos and was popular with younger generations. The film was controversial on its original release for its supposed glorification of assassins and to the violence depicted which were unprecedented at the time.



Figures 8. and 9. Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) and Clyde (Warren Beatty) in *Bonnie and Clyde*

The escalating war in Vietnam was the focus of many protests during the late 1960s. At the time of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy the United States military forces in Vietnam numbered less than 15, 000, the number of troops steadily increased to more than 500,000 in 1966. The gruesome reports from overseas showed death and devastation caused by the relentless bombings of US forces. As television transmissions showed these ghastly images from the Vietnam War, literary and political figures began to protest openly against keeping US troops in Vietnam. Young people became more conscious of their role in society and they protested against the war and the hypocrisy of politics challenging the voter age-limits by the phrase “If you’re old enough to die for your country, you’re old enough to vote”. University students turned American campuses into a political arena; they wanted to address the national problems of war, race and poverty and by doing so, some of these features inevitably fed back into American schools.

Another element among youths of predominantly white, middle-class, educated youth aged 17 to 25 was also emerging: the hippies. The hippie movement of the late sixties preached mysticism, altruism, honesty, joy and non-violence. They professed the power of love, beauty and nature. The Summer of Love in San Francisco in 1967 and the Woodstock Festival in 1969 were two emblematic moments of the hippie movement, since they gathered thousands of youths. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner point out in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film:*

Alienation from the “American Dream” assumed its most striking form during the period of the hippie counterculture. Founded on the values of return to nature, of the virtue of preindustrial social form like commune, of the need to liberate oneself from ‘straight’ behaviour, especially regarding sexuality, of the idea of a simple and more authentic life experience, usually gained with the aid of drugs, the counterculture seemed for a time to be in the process of constituting a genuine and permanent alternative to bourgeois life. But the effort was itself dependent on a well-fuelled capitalist economy, which began to fizzle out in 1970, and dropping out soon gave way to caving in. Law school followed a quick shave and haircut for many former hippies. (p. 23)



**Figure 10. The Summer of Love
San Francisco (1967)**

The illicit and recreational use of cannabis and LSD was a mark of the movement, but drugs were everywhere, musicians used them frequently. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Doors are well-known bands that referenced drugs in the lyrics released in the late 1960s. As for the film industry, the decade introduced many changes.

Throughout the 1960s, Hollywood followed and forged the generation of the moment with variations on the teenpics species of the preceding decade. The clean teens took up surfing.(...) The rock’n’roll teenpics came of age as both musical comedy (*A Hard Days Night*) and documentary (*Woodstock*). Rebellious youth was progressively criminal (*The Wild Angels*,

1966) alienated (*The Graduate*, 1967), and political (*Wild in the Streets*, 1968), qualities that, when put together and played to a rock music soundtrack, culminated in *Easy Rider* (1969), a teenpic amalgam as influential in its time as *Rock Around the Clock* had been in 1956. (Doherty 2002: 191)

Easy Rider (1968) was produced by Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson's BBS company, which was responsible for other alienation classics of the time like *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *The Last Picture Show* (1971). The story of two motorcycle-riding hippies who travel from Los Angeles to New Orleans to sell drugs and who are murdered by rural rednecks in the end, the film turned a small budget into a large profit and helped launch the "New Hollywood" of more "personal" and artistic independent films. It is in this film that the ambivalent ideology of the sixties individualism is most evident. (Ryan and Kellner 1988:23)



Figure 11. George Hanson (Jack Nicholson), Wyatt (Dennis Hopper) and Billy (Peter Fonda) in *Easy Rider*

The 1960s were also known for the generational gentrification of the teenpic. This feature is easily recognised when comparing the audience in a film like *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) with the audience in a film as *Woodstock* (1970). The audiences for The Beatles were visibly adolescent whereas in later rock'n'roll films like *Gimme Shelter* (1979) they were five to ten years older. *Gimme Shelter* revealed the dark side of the counterculture; it showed the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont which culminated in violent death.

The remarkable fact about the youth movement of the 1960s was the movement of “youth” away from a term denoting chronological age or developmental phase and toward an ever more ephemeral experiential realm. As the prerogatives of the teenager expanded, the requirements for entry loosened. The 1960s generation of adolescents admitted to subcultural status millions who could not technically meet age qualification. Date of birth became a rough but not required criterion for membership; “youth” became concept, not chronology. (Doherty 2002: 190)

The decade ends with the first human beings walking on the moon. The American Space Exploration Program culminated with the Apollo 11 Space Mission which comprised the successful landing on the moon, with two of its astronauts walking on it. Hollywood’s productions of the time reflected the on going technological evolution and expressed the doubts about the technological future. Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968) might be considered a good example for exposing uncertainties regarding the future and social criticism. The representation of the fatedness of evil, the underlying violent human character and the recalcitrance of working-class anger are features which Kubrick deals with rhetorically in *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). *A Clockwork Orange* is about Alex a working class adolescent whose criminal weaknesses are cured by state controllers using behaviour modification. But Alex, deprived of his criminal instincts, becomes a victim of those he himself victimized, so he attempts suicide. The failed attempt destroys his new, changed condition, and he reverts to his previous criminal nature.

Despite the social criticism present in such films like *A Clockwork Orange* and *2001: Space Odyssey* many Hollywood films of the decade promoted conservative positions on the family, human nature, sexuality, crime, war, politics and society as a whole. *The Green Berets* (1968) can be considered a good example for a rightwing positioning regarding the Vietnam War.

The 1970s

In the beginning of the 1970s some events were determining in giving American youth a different sense of their identity: the consequences of the implementation of the Motion Picture Association of America's rating system (in 1968) which opened up the scope of films that might be viewed by teenagers, an evidence that the 'adult' brand had long been a 'bait' for nonadults and a code word for salacious contents targeted at the largest number of frequent moviegoers the sixteen- to twenty-year-olds; The national suffrage of 18-year-olds (in 1971) recognised a powerful weight of this age group in American society. Protest movements against the Vietnam War amplified as the number of young boys drafted to fight in Vietnam increased. Consequently, the number of satiric and tragic films like *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971) were going away from the American tradition by representing war as inhumane and unreasonable.



Figure 12. *A Clockwork Orange*

It was a decade in which Americans distrust of government rose and confidence both in the executive branch and in all institutional leadership fell. This sort of crisis had its reflection in Hollywood's productions since it led to a progressive attempt to construct representational codes and social attitudes. Such is the case of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather I and II* (1971 and 1974) *The Conversation* (1974), William Friedkin's *The*

Exorcist (1973) and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). They are a few examples of the decade's productions that operate in a generally metaphorical level. *Jaws* and *The Exorcist* can be interpreted as metaphoric representations of fear generated by social movements like feminism, crisis in confidence in business and civic leadership.

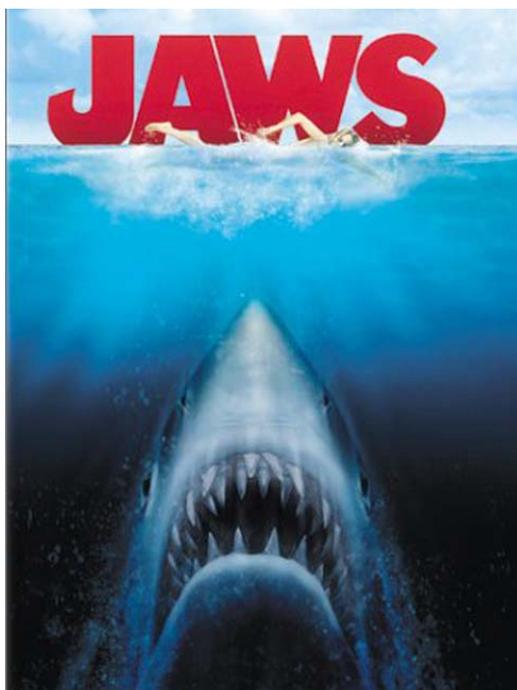


Figure 13. Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*

Jaws (1975) depicts a society weakened internally by the slackness of traditional institutions and values and a failure of traditional authorities; these weaknesses undermine society, threaten its integrity and are projected onto an evil that appears to come from outside. The integrity of a community is threatened by a shark and then restored with the help of the town's sheriff, Brody, who sets out with a seaman and a scientist and kills the evil creature. *The Exorcist* (1973) is the story of the possession of an adolescent girl Regan (Linda Blair) and the attempts of her mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), to rid Regan of the demon. After consulting medical and psychiatric authorities Chris calls for a priest and an exorcism is performed. Chris' husband abandoned her and the demon's arrival occurs when she is lying in bed alone. She becomes incapable of dealing with the crisis and collapses. So, one of the film's implicit messages can be seen in the need for a father to protect and discipline women and children. Another implicit message can be read in the

way science is incapable of dealing with Regan's situation suggesting that "evil" is impervious to rational solutions.

As the seventies progressed, crisis films acquired an additional meaning. With the decline of the economy, the increased threat of joblessness, and the reduction of income through inflation, the sense of a lack of confidence spread. If in the early seventies crisis films seem preoccupied with responding to and pacifying the feistiness of the sixties, by the mid-seventies they are more concerned with economic issues and with the negative psychological effects of back-to-back recessions. The mood of mid-seventies films is markedly less optimistic. (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 51)

Economically, the seventies were marked by two oil crisis in 1973 and 1979, which forced many western countries to ration gasoline, the price quadrupled. The funding for the Vietnam War, the loose domestic spending and the oil prices contributed to hyperinflation and high unemployment rates in the United States.

After a mid seventies peak of popular disillusion and projected anxiety in disaster and conspiracy films, American cultured seemed to turn to fantasies of power *Star Wars* (1977) and *Superman* (1979) and romantic, nostalgic, or religious transcendence of the world of inflation, unemployment, and loss of national prestige (*Grease*, *Close Encounters*, and *Animal House* were the top films of 1978). These films are landmarks for the film industry, they represent high investment, a change to more conservative values and were directed to a teen audience. Studios started to invest in such big-budget films since they had a higher probability of profit, which made the investments seem less risky than they used to be. These films appealed to teenagers but were also enjoyed by other age groups, in general, people who were eager to watch films with action, fantasy, myth and a lot of special effects. *Star Wars*, for example, is a teen film for all, Luke Skywalker, the main character, is the archetypical teenager looking for his daddy (who is the villain in the film). He is an unlucky kid seeking direction, not a tough rebel fleeing restriction. Films like *Star Wars* offered what many white middle class Americans were seeking in the late seventies – "A New Hope". The successes of the previously mentioned blockbusters in the late 1970s indicated the good health of the film industry.



Figure 14. *Star Wars*

In order to satisfy the consumer demands of seventy-five percent of its audiences Hollywood studios' experienced a shift in operational activity from production to distribution. Hollywood capitalised its presence in the market place (video productions, television) and by diversifying production strategies and distribution channels resolved its commercial problems. Studios were able to maximise their investment through production control and distribution deals. The studios recognised the marketing value of the in capturing a potential audience and delivering it to other products as tie-in merchandise or sequels. In a list of the most successful film rentals of the 70s and 80s found in *Rebels and Chicks: a History of the Hollywood Teen Movie*: 140, two of the top ten money-makers of the 1970s film video rentals are *Star Wars* with a profit of \$193.8 million followed by *Jaws* with a total of \$129.5 million. The most profitable film rentals of the 1980s are Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) with a profit of \$228.1 million, followed by Richard Marquand's *Return of the Jedi* (1983) with \$169.1 million.

The blockbuster and the multiplex were two strategies developed by Hollywood for the changing marketplace. Both provide the audiences with a wide variety of cinematic experiences. The blockbuster provided the audiences with world cinema formulas such as sci-fi, fantasy, myth, horror sex, comedies, high school dramas and others. The blockbuster became an industry standard and initiated a trend for sequels which continued throughout

the 1980s. The multiplexes provided a greater choice of programmes and more intimate auditoria. The number of cinema goes steadily increased into the 1980s.



Figure 15. The multiplex

Chapter II

The Teen Genre in the 1980s

1. The 1980s and Film Culture

“Films make rhetorical arguments through the selection of representational elements that project rather than reflect a world. In doing so, they impose on the audience a certain position or point of view, and the formal conventions occlude this positioning by erasing the signs of cinematic artificiality.” (Ryan 1990: 1) The conventions referred to include narrative closure, image continuity, character identification, dramatic motivation and others that help to “instil ideology by creating the illusion that what happens on the screen is a neutral recording of objective events, rather than a construct from a certain point of view.” (Ryan 1990: 1) The 1980s saw this paradigm on a great scale. When Ronald Reagan declared his presidential candidacy in November 1979, the press did not take him seriously, he was the oldest of the Republican candidates and someone his party had not effectively supported in the past. Both the press and the Republican Party misjudged Reagan’s effective use of television and he surprised many with his communication skills. Reagan’s use of television through out his presidency showed that he could convince the American people of his policies. At the beginning of his presidency Reagan persuaded many Americans that government was the problem, so it was necessary to favour a competitive economic efficiency in which an aggressive business culture would produce and distribute wares free of constraints and federal regulation. Such economic policies, as well as reducing taxes and government spending on welfare, would make America prosper and give consumers a wider choice. According to Michael Schaller in *Reckoning Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s*:

Reagan succeeded, as few actors or politicians have, in persuading Americans to suspend their disbelief. It was an era when saying something made it so, when, as in a daydream, anything seemed possible. Deficits did not exist, were someone else’s fault, or did not matter; the poor caused their own plight or were impoverished because they received too much money from the government; the wealthy, on the other hand, had been abused by not being permitted to keep more of their income; the homeless preferred to sleep on steam gates while teenage mothers and young crack users were to “just say no” or go to jail; terrorism was evil, unless selling weapons to terrorists might free hostages or provide funds for anti-communist guerrillas...These comforting truths appealed to Reagan and many who served and admired him. But as the United States approaches a new century with its “new world

order,” they seem more like stage props and less a set of principles to guide national policies. (p.181)

The film industry directly and indirectly reflected the policies of the time and Hollywood’s productions were directed towards what was considered to be the audiences’ expectations. According to Susan Jeffords in *Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*:

Certainly the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and his reelection in 1984...offered Hollywood some insight into ‘what audiences want to see’: spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism. Through out the blockbuster successes of films such as *First Blood* (1982, Ted Kotcheff), *Superman* (1978, Richard Donner), *Die Hard* (1988, John McTierman), *Lethal Weapon* (1987, Richard Donner), *Terminator* (1984, James Cameron), *Robocop* (1987, Paul Verhoeven) [and] *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981, Steven Spielberg) ... Hollywood indicated that it had overcome the ‘fragmentation’ and ‘distress’ of the late 1970s [a decade marked by critical *auteurist* directors] and come successfully into a multimillion dollar era of action films that seemed to be ‘what audiences want to see’. (p.16-17)

The 1980s films mentioned above were box-office successes and illustrate ‘what audiences wanted to see’. The audiences cited were varied and had different expectations in respect of the films they were watching. Despite a ‘domesticised’ audience which meant that an increasingly number of people would be dependent on new media forms (like video) and distribution channels (cable networks) to view films, Hollywood began early to plan for television, video and satellite incomes. The video market developed rapidly to represent significant amount revenue for film producers. Hollywood accommodated itself to and benefited from the new technologies and distribution patterns selling its films more widely than before, making the 1980s a very healthy period for the industry.

The audiences profile changed, becoming younger, with higher disposable incomes which was reflected in the rise in ticket prices and indicated an audience with fewer commitments still looking for extra-domestic entertainment. This profile determined productions and marketing strategies during the decade. The large amount of action films produced was geared to this market segment, the same way as the growth of the multiplexes offered wider possibilities for more than a visit per week for a person with less financial or domestic commitments. Naturally, teenagers were the decades’ most consistent

moviegoers, they enjoyed going out, most did not have financial commitments and they had the necessary disposable time. The special affinity adolescents had for actors representing their own age group had been acquired through magazines, fanzines and TV promo shows; they wanted to watch their stories, their experiences and their lives portrayed on film since they were growing, learning and being entertained by them.

Apart from the fact that many films in the 1980s had spectacular narratives, they were also visually very appealing. The decade's films are therefore associated with the use of special effects improved with the use of technological breakthroughs, especially computer imaging, which gave directors possibilities they did not have before. Films like *Star Wars* evolved from the late 1970s into the 1980s with sequels full of spectacular special effects. Directors like George Lucas and Spielberg had the possibility to transform their wildest thoughts into film. It is the decade of the new cinema of attractions; dreams and nightmares were displayed on screen more realistically than ever before. Science-fiction, as well as, horror prospered on a grand scale. Audiences were therefore reintroduced to escapism, like *ET-The Extraterrestrial* (1981) and *Back to the Future* (1985) directed by Spielberg's protégé Robert Zemeckis. The latter's sequels are examples of the new film realities, as lucrative movie franchises begun to emerge.



Figure 16. A family reunion in the past. *Back to the Future*

The amount of films released from 1980 to 1989 which feature teenagers in leading roles (over 450) shows not only the vitality and spending power of the industry but also

that of its audiences. For example, *The Karate Kid* franchise of 1984, 1986 and 1989 might be seen as recognition of the need to remake the *Rocky* film franchise for teenagers.

2. Hollywood and the Genre System

The French word 'genre' refers to a kind, a type or a category of a particular thing or phenomenon. Film culture uses the term to typify various categories of motion pictures production. At the reception level, moviegoers readily perceive what most film genres are. Easily recognisable ones are Westerns, musicals, horror films, science-fiction films, epics, war films, to mention only a few. These tend to be commercial mainstream Hollywood productions rarely made anywhere else in any quantity. According to Steve Neale in *Genre and Hollywood*:

The definition and discussion of genre and genres tended to focus on mainstream, commercial films in general and Hollywood films in particular. Sometimes, indeed, genre and genres have been exclusively identified with these kinds of film. (p. 9)

A significant proportion of films are commonly associated with a specific genre, that is, the films' characteristics fall easily into the categories of Hollywood's commercially successful mass entertainment. Richard T. Jameson cited in Rick Altman's *Film/Genre*, states:

Genre is not a word that pops up in every conversation about films – or every review – but the idea is second nature to the movies and our awareness of them. Movies belong to genres much in the same way people belong to families or ethnic groups. Name one of the classic, bedrock genres – Western, comedy, musical, war film, gangster picture, science-fiction, horror – and even the most casual moviegoer will come up with a mental image of it, partly visual, partly conceptual. (p. 13)

Genre is also a device to stabilize the film industry, that is to say, the genre system is an attempt to minimize the economic risks involved in the process of making expensive films. According to John Belton in *American Cinema/American Culture*:

Genres result from the proven success of one-of-a-kind films in the market place. The box-office fortune of one particular kind of film results in the production of another film that resembles it in terms of plot and character type. The film industry assumes that the audience that came to the earlier hit will return to see a film similar in nature to it. This can be seen most clearly in the proliferation of sequels (and prequels) which accompany so many box-office hits of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. (p.116)

Familiar genre elements, motifs and themes are used to attract audiences that expect to see in the next movie the features that they have seen and enjoyed in the past. Although this may seem straightforward, the industry has to innovate and is expected to do so. Again John Belton correctly points out that:

They [the audiences] are drawn to the genre much in the way they are drawn to a brand name product. But they are also enticed by the prospect of seeing a film that *differs* in a number of respects from films they have seen before, in this way, the system of genres relies on a combination of the familiar and the unknown, conventionality and novelty, similarity and difference. It will use the basic ingredients of the genre to produce certain expectations in the audience, but it will also adapt, modify, or play with those conventions in order to provide audiences with a unique entertainment experience. (p. 116)

The teenpic, or the teen genre, is normally held to have emerged, like modern teenage cultures, during the course of the 1950s. Despite the recognisable genre elements that lie underneath each teenpic production, relevant for the teenpic is/are the teenager/s around which the film develops. First, there were dramas and social problem films like *The Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1953), then horror and science-fiction with films like *I was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) and *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1959); the 1960s brought the *Beach Party* cycle (1963-65) in which adults were absent but their values remained, the teenagers represented in those films were 'the good kids'; in the late 1960s and early 1970s films like *The Graduate* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) offered a serious critique of the society of the decade but generally focussing on young adults rather than adolescents, whose concerns

one could find addressed in TV products like *Happy Days*. The 1980s brought teen-centred dramas and romances like *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986). *Rumble Fish* (1983) and *River's Edge* (1986) which were teen-centred art or social problem films. These films all have significant differences from each other but they all focus on teenage characters. According to Steve Neale, in *Genre and Hollywood*:

Since the early 1970s, Hollywood has been decisively 'juvenalized' (Doherty 1988:235): not only do most Hollywood films aim to cater for a teenage audience, but directors and producers like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, who as Doherty points out were 'Reared on the teen-oriented fare of the 1950s (ibid.), have through films like *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* helped establish a teen-friendly trend toward big-budget action, adventure and fantasy films, and through films like *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Back to the Future* (1985) a trend towards the recycling of 1950s teenage culture.(p.124)

Indeed, there is no single principle by which genres can be classified. For the purpose of this study I have chosen films from the 1980s decade in which teenagers are central characters. I believe that the teen genre of the 1980s reflects the social, political and cultural scenery of Reagan's political administrations and the new confident America that he chose to promote.

3. The Teen Experience of the 1980s

There are several theories explaining the reappearance of the teenpic in the 1980s. A more straightforward approach to the subject by Jonathan Bernstein in *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* claims that Hollywood in the 1980s cared less about meaning and much more about money since the film industry aimed its products at "dumb, horny, crater-faced, metal-mouthed, 14-year-old boys who lurked around the multiplex or the video store or the rec room" (1997: 2). This visually arresting explanation regarding teenage audiences provides information on teenage demographics, places of resort and suggests that the average teen moviegoer was probably not very smart. David Cook borrows a more convincing argument from Thomas Doherty in *A History of Narrative*

Film (2004:14): “the secure profitability of late 1970s blockbusters that were targeted at young people – like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Superman* (1978) – convinced Hollywood accountants in the 1980s to again rely on their youth market, almost as much as they had in the 1950s”. The fact that by the early 1980s three quarters of the film audiences were teenagers is in itself of major importance in the choices made. Hollywood’s executives always had to cater for the largest share of its audience and it did so in this case.

Politics had an appreciative influence on Hollywood productions and Ronald Reagan’s attitude advocated a certain nostalgic return to a mythical version of the 1950s. Such nostalgia can be read as further evidence of audience responsiveness to the possibility of fleeing a troubled present into an untroubled past. Some teen films from the 1980s fled the present into the past. Robert Zemeckis’ *Back to the Future* (1985) is a film which takes us back to the ‘innocence’ of Eisenhower’s America in the 1950s. According to John Belton in *American Cinema/American Culture*:

Reagan, as president, automatically evoked this earlier period for most Americans who grew up with him as a Hollywood movie star. To many, Reagan symbolized the 1950s – at least the idyllic, small-town 1950s Eisenhower America as it existed in the popular imagination. Thus when Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) time-travels back to 1955 in *Back to the Future* (1985), a Ronald Reagan Western, *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954) is playing at the small, down-town movie theatre. (p. 322)

Soon after the arrival of Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) in 1955, his mother falls in love with him, putting his own existence at risk. Marty must get his parents together or he will never be born. This is a typical 1980s fantasy time-travel personal jeopardy movie. Protecting the integrity of oneself and one’s family was a Reaganite theme (cf. *The Terminator*, 1984). In order to accomplish this he has to ‘restyle’ his father. So his job is to turn a ‘nerd’ into a ‘cool guy’ in the eyes of his mother and the future will be saved. The film was one of the highest grossing films of 1985 earning \$105 million and became an international phenomenon. The relation between the past and the present is put in interesting terms, that is, a materialistic and an appearance-conscious individual of the 1980s is sent back to the past where he serves as a match-maker between his future mom and dad and thus ensures his own birth. Marty is on a personal quest to remake his father in his own image so he can be attractive to his mother. The nostalgia craze for the 1950s is

one of the points of the film, the return to a bygone era that had become identified in contemporary culture with happier days. By establishing a short cut between the 1950s and the 1980s one can identify how a nostalgic past can be updated for the present. *Back to the Future* might be seen as an excellent example of a Hollywood interpretation of history which has a significant impact on the public's thinking about the past. Marty's return to the past and his actions (back then) offered his family the possibility of upwards mobility in the future, so that when he returns his family has improved its income. Another example of the return to more 'innocent' times is Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). A film that sent Kathleen Turner back to the 1950s to relive her subsequent life and re-emerge with renewed hope for the future. Able to undo her mistakes, she openly repeats them for the sake of her lads – a perfect instance of female self-sacrifice in the defence of the *status quo* and of the way that Reaganite individualism worked differently for men and women.

Another film that conveys the emphasis put on the individual and in the entrepreneurial ability of the Reagan era is *Risky Business* (1983). While Joel Goodsen (Tom Cruise) is home alone, he enters the world of business by opening a brothel in the family home. His success wins him the admiration of a college recruiter who secures his admission to Princeton. Joel's coming of age is a celebration of his daring business education. The film flatters the deregulating drive of the market which allows any individual to engage in any economical activity. In the Reaganite leisure industry, the system works and 'the market is good'; the film encapsulates the greed of the 1980s and depicts the affirmation of white middle class male opportunism. According to John Belton in *American Cinema/American Culture* (1994:329): "(In Marshall Brickman's) original script, Joel does not get into college at the end. This downbeat conclusion was filmed and tested on preview audiences who clearly preferred a happy ending, which was then tacked onto the film."

Teenagers flocked to the film theatres in order to watch "their own world" being flashed across the screen. Aggressive marketing strategies made the film industry spend more in advertising, so that after exhibition in the multiplexes, teens would spend more on merchandise and film video rentals. The 1980s gave teenagers a greater sense of presence in popular media, both the cinema and television, and as Shary (2002:55) points out "a deeper potential to be influenced by the films they saw, and a wider range of options from which they could construct and compare their senses of themselves". The dominance of the

individual over the social seemed to be a reflexion of Reagan era politics and that was also to be seen on film. The individualism that characterized the 1980s can be easily spotted in teen productions of the era and contrasted with the *auteurist* films of the previous decades in which social issues and character studies had a more prominent role. One interesting aspect of the teen productions of this period is the emphasis put on the looks of the actors. An example of this can be seen in the film *The Breakfast Club*. Allyson (Ally Sheedy) wears ill-fitting clothes that cover her body completely and her hair style looks like a spider's web that hides her face. In harmony with her style she is almost autistic in her manners, but in the end Claire, the popular girl who wears designer label clothes and diamond earrings, manages to transform Allyson, taking her hair from her face and even putting some make up on her. Allyson's look in the end makes her feel better accepted since the group demonstrates approval regarding the transformation. A change in the way someone looks can make all the difference in films such as this one and transmits the idea to teenagers that changing one's look might be the pathway to popularity, social balance and therefore integration.

4. Teen School Film

The school teen genre which includes films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *The Breakfast Club* portray the school environment as a secure structure for the education of adolescents. One of the most important ideas suggested by the genre was that the difficulties of the teenage years at school were transitional. Eventually, we all grow up and that stage will be past. Even the fiercest rebel will conform in the end and this is one of the anxieties Hollywood helped to ease with the genre.

The school film is probably the most easily definable subgenre of the youth film, given that its main plot actions focus on the setting of junior high school or high school campuses. The vast majority of school films present the educational building as a symbolic site of social evolution, with young people learning from and rebelling against their elders (and each other) in an ongoing cycle of generational adjustment and conflict. Most often, the school itself is an undifferentiated location in which various gender, race, class, and,

above all, popularity issues are contested among students. This process of growing up among a group of youths under the guidance and control of elder people is presented as a phase through which every teenager must go. School is therefore a site of individual growth through educational achievements and in the earning of social acceptance. Young people learn very early on that certain traits – good looks, money (in the form of nice clothes or cool toys), intelligence, athletic skills, and toughness – yield special attention from their elders and their peers. The struggle for attention and/or approval in any school system is a complex contest of recognition of generic privilege and negotiation of social status. Young people without naturally attractive traits must learn to cultivate whatever characteristics will most successfully earn them acceptance, unless they reject the processes of acceptance and adopt an alternate means of gaining self-identity and esteem. Yet by the teen years, with the onset of puberty and adolescent angst over conforming to the adult world, young people are faced with even larger conflicts, and their physical placement in the school environment becomes a visible reminder of their quandary. School may be a land of opportunity to demonstrate one's worth or a site of oppression where one's attempt to achieve a sense of self-worth met with resistance or ridicule.

Most American teens' socialization takes place at or around school. Most school districts offer junior high school, or middle school, to students between the ages of 12 and 14, and high school to students aged 15 through 18. Since the school is thus a prime location for a wide range of youth development, movie writers and directors have capitalized on the variety of applications to which the school setting can be utilized generically. As opposed to other youth issues which are less integral to the school setting, such as crime, sex, terror, or family, although these issues are often developed in films around school settings, what gives the school subgenre its focus is the tangible socialization process at school. The school environment remains by and large a micro cosmos of the society that encircles it, at its best and at its worst. The alluring and the repellent coexist and teenagers rehearse at school for what is waiting for them outside it.

The American school film represents adolescents in distinctive types, each of them possessing certain levels of academic achievement and social acceptance. Most commonly, the levels of academic achievement and acceptance are subordinated to social learning or are presented of little relevance when compared with social learning. Teens are expected to fit in to society and the skills for that purpose are mostly acquired during these school

years. The absence of teaching and learning processes in the school genre is usually compensated for by knowledge attained in social exchanges. In such environments, conflicts are inevitable; especially within a population with physical energy, sexual curiosity, and psychological tension. The dramatic potential for conflicts and their resolutions is a fertile ground for film writers and directors.

A school population, as it is presented in films of the 1980s, such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (based on Cameron Crowe's study of his own school life), and *The Breakfast Club's* ready (stereo)typecasting, is represented by an ensemble of school characters. Both films display the genre's most familiar five basic characters in school films: the nerd, the basket case, the rebel, the popular girl or cheer leader and the athlete or jock. The representation of these stereotypes underwent little change through out the 1980s. It seems to me that film makers put little effort into experimenting with the type of characters featured in school films, even as the context of school images and the conditions of school environments have continued to evolve. Thus, the maintenance of such stereotypes in Hollywood's productions of the 1980s helps to reinforce perennial conservative attitudes towards youth. Moreover, Hollywood contributed to legitimate dominant institutions and traditional values such as individualism (self-reliance, survival of the fittest), capitalism (competition, upward mobility), patriarchy (privileging of men, positioning women in a secondary role) and racism (the unequal partitioning of social power), largely in the latter case by ignoring it.

5. Teen Horror Films

Just as an example of the diversity of issues which the teen film might address, I briefly cite the example of the horror film genre. Adolescence is a time in which many issues regarding bodily changes, alienation and anger arise. The appeal of horror to adolescents can be regarded as a response of these very issues. The youthful fears of being different, confronting adult responsibilities and becoming sexually active haunt many teenagers and have been metaphorically explored by many horror films. *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) are two films that explored

the metaphor of bodily transformations, as do *The Fly* (the 1958 film and later the Cronenberg's remake) in more adult contexts.

The possibilities that new technologies introduced in the film industry were many. For many directors the possibilities of trying new visual effects gave them the opportunity to experiment and extend their own imagery. One interesting device is the use of point of view shots from the killer's perspective using the new steadicam cameras. This way, the audience helps stalk the victims. The horror films benefited largely from the new technologies and the 1980s celebrated the genre. Horror films like *Friday the 13th* (1980) or John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) initiated a cycle of horror movies that went through the 1980s into the early 1990s. They were especially targeted at teen audiences, exploring as they did adolescent fears, and most of them were box-office successes.

The coming of age teen horror movies explored the teen angst in different ways. Most films were set in familiar places like home, school or related to their ways of life. The conservative morals of the 1980s had important repercussions in these movies. For example in *Halloween* a mysterious figure stalks and kills four teens, all of whom are sexually active, while a fifth escaping since she is a virgin. The film series *Friday the 13th* started in 1980 showed the violently and perversely stalking and killing of teenagers at a summer camp by a dead boy's mother. The killers in all the movies of the series are retaliating to previous abuses inflicted by teens, who remain divided between sinners and the sinless, the later being spared from death. The punishment of moral transgressors in the horror slasher movies echoed 1980s puritan morals. According to Timothy Shary in *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*:

In this way, the teen horror subgenre that would thrive in the 1980s relied upon established notions of misfortune falling upon moral transgressors. The difference was that such 'transgressions' as pre-marital sex and youthful hedonism were not resulting in punishment by social institutions like parents, teachers or the law, they were resulting in death at the hands of a greater evil. (p.58)

The slasher films can be related to the problems that the new culture of sexuality that post-sixties America had brought with it. The character of male-female relations was changed by birth control, liberalized abortion laws and greater sexual permissiveness. These changes gave women more power and independence which changed the role of male

responsibility. Thus, tension and confusion rose around female/male relationship and commitment. The conservative slasher film can therefore be said to accomplish two tasks: it carries out a metaphoric attack on feminism and on disobedient youth, and portrays a world in need of paternalist power. The aggression portrayed in slasher films presupposes at some point someone's submission which can be read as necessary to maintaining the social system stable. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner point out in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*:

The locus of submission and domination that secures stability in the conservative framework is the family. One could say therefore that while the slasher films evidence a direct reaction against independent women's sexuality and against feminism in general, they also are part of an attempt to restabilize the patriarchal social system as a whole, by reasserting discipline over youth and by repositioning women as the submissive other of a primary, aggressive male subject. To a certain extent these films must be read as violent reactions to a violent feminism and the youth sexual revolution have done to traditional patriarchal prerogatives. (p. 193)

The pattern of the slasher films eventually became quite repetitive and achieved a kind of legitimacy through parodie films such as *Student Bodies*, *The Slumber* and *Pandemonium*, which frequently showed body counts after each murder. The teen horror film portrayed youth in extreme representations but not many films of the genre managed to successfully combine the intensity of fear they wanted to induce in its audiences with the teen audiences' own apprehensions of entering adulthood. But the fact that both the teen school and the teen slasher have played to the same audience demographics is clear from *The Breakfast Club* poster parody applied in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* released a year later (see the next page and page 50)

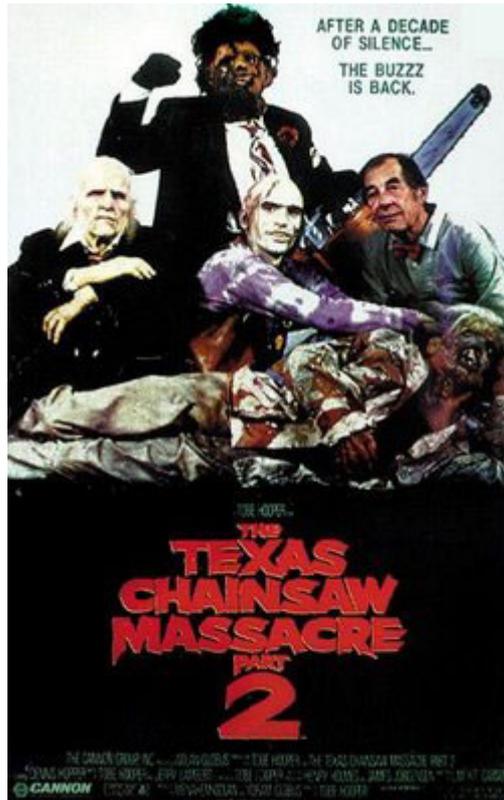


Figure 17. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1986)
The poster for the film parodied that of the *Breakfast Club*

6. The Brat Pack

The Brat Pack is a popular media term used to refer to a group of successful and fashionable young actors, writers, performers, etc. David Blum the author of the *New York* magazine cover story entitled: “Hollywood’s Brat Pack” printed in June 1985, uses the expression Brat Pack and compares a group of young successful actors of the 1980’s to another group, the Rat Pack of the 1960’s: “The Brat Pack is to the 1980’s what the Rat Pack was to the 1960’s, a roving band of famous young stars on the prowl for parties, women and a good time. And just like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford and Sammy Davis Jr., these guys work together, too”. David Blum spent an evening at Hard Rock Café in Los Angeles with three members of the Brat Pack: Rob Lowe (“the most

beautiful face”), Judd Nelson (“the overrated”) and Emilio Estevez (“the unofficial president of the Brat Pack”). Blum points out how they take advantage of their popularity to enter a club without waiting in line or to see a movie without paying. Furthermore, he refers to their unimpressive acting talent, highlighting the fact that what is more important for Hollywood at that time is box office profit. In comparison with actors like Marlon Brandon, James Dean or Robert De Niro, who spend years studying acting, most Brat Pack members like Sean Penn, Kevin Bacon, Tom Hanks, Johnny Depp, Matt Dillon and Mickey Rourke went straight from high school into acting, and therefore they had no serious acting training. Their acting skills were arguably less important than the ability to attract and fascinate teenage audiences, attesting to the fact that great acting talent is not always important to iconic Hollywood. These young stars were images in media texts, and as such they were products of Hollywood. They were the result of the money, time and energy spent by the industry in building up star images through publicity, promotion, fan clubs, fanzines, promos, etc. This opinion is expressed by Richard Dyer in *Star* in which he quotes Daniel Boorstin’s argument in his book *The Image*:

Both stardom and particular stars are seen as owing their existence solely to the machinery of their production. Not only are they a phenomenon of consumption (in the sense of demand); they do not even have substance or meaning. This is the essence of Daniel Boorstin’s argument in his book *The Image*. According to Boorstin, stars, like so much of contemporary culture, are pseudo-events. That is, they appear to be meaningful but are in fact empty of meaning. Thus a star is well-known for her/his well-knownness, and not for any talent or specific quality. They are an example of the ‘celebrity’, marketed on the strength of trivial differences of appearance. (p.13)

A good example of the construction of stars is Blum’s article. His categorization of the Brat Pack members reveals details and images which contributed to lifting these young actors to the condition of stars: Tom Cruise (“the hottest”), Timothy Hutton (“the only one with an Oscar”), Matt Dillon (“the one least likely to replace Marlon Brandon”), Nicholas Cage (“the ethnic chair”) and Sean Penn (“the natural heir to Robert De Niro” and also “the most gifted of them all”).

The film that brought together this group of actors, according to Blum, is *Taps* (1981), followed by *Fast Times at Ridgmont High* (1982), *The Outsiders* (1983), *Rumble Fish* (1983), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *St. Elmo’s Fire* (1985). These movies do not have any young actresses in the leading roles and the actresses referred to in Blum’s

article: Ally Sheedy and Demi Moore do not seem to count as members of the Brat Pack. Molly Ringwald is not even mentioned, despite *The Breakfast Club* being considered one of the Brat Pack movies. The exclusion of women might have been necessary to reinforce the parallel with Sinatra's Rat Pack, or it may just have been a reassertion of Hollywood's lower commodity value of actresses. The interest the media had in these young actors brought their off-screen life to public attention and scrutiny, which eventually contributed to their glamorization making adolescents go to the movies. Adolescents back in the 1980s saw themselves heightened and idealised in those films. By representing the dreams and dilemmas of young adults in the 1980s, the Brat Packers were idols for millions of teens who were in search of guidance as they traded adolescence for young adulthood in a decade when conformity and materialism were held up as high ideals. These star actors were part of a phenomenon of consumption which has two relevant factors contributing to its existence. Film-makers depend on stars' existence for the kinds of meanings they can generate, but the audiences –the consumers – are a determining force in the process. The relationship between star/audience contributes immensely to the phenomenon of consumption and according to Richard Dyer that relationship is divided into four categories:

- *emotional affinity*. The audience feels a loose attachment to a particular protagonist deriving jointly from star, narrative and the individual personality of the audience member: a standard sense of involvement;
- *self-identification*. This happens when involvement has reached the point at which the audience-member places himself [sic] in the same situation and persona of the star;
- *imitation*. This commonest among the young and takes the star/audience relationship beyond cinema-going, with 'the star' acting as some sort of model for the audience;
- *projection*. Imitation merges into projection at the point at which the process becomes more than a simple mimicking of clothing, hairstyle, kissing and the like. (*Stars*, p.18)

The scholar, Michael J. Palmer describes these young actors' film work as "the socially apathetic, cynical, money-possessed and ideologically barren eighties generation"; whereas the film critic, James Thorburn claims that "eighties teens drew instruction and

inspiration (from Brat Pack films) and had their faith in society reinforced, and their moral fabric strengthened.”²

Andrew Pulver and Steven Paul Davies in the article “Brat Pack Confidential” published in *The Guardian* on December, 15, 2000 point out that: “The heart and soul of the Brat Pack, in retrospect, were a gang of nine: the principal casts of two movies, *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo’s Fire* both released in 1985. Emilio Estevez, Andrew McCarthy, Robert Hepler Lowe, Demetria Gene Guynes (we know her better as Demi Moore, the surname taken from her first husband Freddie), Judd Nelson, Mary Megan Winningham, Molly Ringwald, Michael Anthony Hall (he swapped his first two names) and Alexandra Elizabeth Sheedy. Most references to the Brat Pack refer to these two films as central to the definition of who and what the Brat Pack was. Coppola’s *The Outsiders* was important in the process of making the Brat Pack since it brought many of them together and its actors made films in one another’s company until 1988.

In *St Elmo’s Fire* Judd Nelson, Andrew McCarthy, Rob Lowe, Ally Sheedy, Emilio Estevez and Demi Moore star as good friends who find their faith in one other severely tested by the complications that love and commitment bring to the yuppie life style. This film can be seen as a follow-up of the former. Billy’s (Rob Lowe) nonconformity leads to failure and heartbreak and even who seems to be the real yuppie success story in the film – Jules (Demi Moore) – is in reality falling into financial crisis and cocaine addiction.

The yuppie life style of the 1980s represented in *St. Elmo’s Fire* conveys a series of economic and social features of the decade. The generalised ideas of materialism, ambition, greed and individualism of the 1980s are represented by the different characters in the film. The yuppie lifestyle present in Jules character can also be read as the ideal of class mobility – the yuppie phenomenon - which entails a lifestyle of high income (earning and spending a lot of money), fast living (induced by cocaine use, which was at the time a popular drug for the extra boot yuppie people needed to keep going, whether that be work or play) and individualism. The prevailing cultural representations that have shaped the yuppie lifestyle prescribe certain patterns of behaviour, thought, and feeling. *St. Elmo’s Fire’s* representations of this lifestyle can be read as belonging to a broader system of representations that construct what is perceived to be the social reality of the time.

² Manning, Jason, “The Eighties Club.”
<http://eightiesclub.tripod.com/id299.htm> (8 April 2008)

Wealth and privilege are central to a film that closes the cycle of the Brat Pack films *Less Than Zero* (1987). The film elaborates on the threats lying in wait for those who do not have what it takes to succeed in the fast-paced business world. Julian (Robert Downey Jr.) is one such failure, turning to cocaine. Clay (Andrew McCarthy), Julian's best friend and his antithesis, is rich, values college education and has what it takes to succeed, although that itself is not clearly defined. *Less Than Zero* is an interesting sociological analysis of the 1980s and the thin line that separates the glitzy excitement of the "material world" and its corrupt, sordid, landscape. By 1988, members of the Brat Pack, who had initially represented the rise of a movement in group performances - that is ensemble, non-star acting - had themselves become individual star performing characters and appearing in star vehicle movies designed specifically for them. Actors like Tom Cruise or Nicholas Cage did not want to be identified with the label that had made them famous. The only ones to carry forward their careers were Demi Moore and to a lesser extent Rob Lowe. Moore rose high until she began to falter with the dreadful *Scarlet Letter* (1995), followed by the preposterous *Striptease* (1996).



Figure 18. *Less Than Zero*

As I have said before, the movement in group performances had its peak in 1985 with *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire*. Both films' representations of adolescence contextualise them within the decade's economic, political and social scenario. *The Breakfast Club* which I will be looking at in more detail in the next chapter conveys a representation of adolescence which is both reassuring and flattering for teenage audiences.

The film presents one of the phases teenagers must go through – during late high school. All the characters seem to have ‘real’ problems which are actually specifically teenage ones. They are in the process of adjusting to society and finding their place in it. Thus, the film flatters the teenage audience making teenagers’ angst seem ‘real’ problems. The film’s happy ending, in which the vicissitudes of adolescence seem to have been quietened down, reassures teens that despite difficulties, they all eventually move forward into the next phase.

Chapter III

The Breakfast Club (1985) - From Misfit to Fit

1. The Representation of New Yuppie Teenage Stereotypes

The Breakfast Club presents the most commonly known tribes (a term commonly accepted) in American high schools, represented by a single specimen of the kind, who must be on time (7 a.m. on a Saturday) at school to be punished for breach of school conduct. In itself, the fact that they all came and were on time for detention shows that the system of which they are part is working and that that day represents an upsetting but necessary adjustment to the established order. The film does not seem to question the righteousness of the detention, even though the adult that is controlling the teenagers' detention is presented as vicious and cynical. A certain healthy rebellion is presented in the film; in the end a sense of conformism with mainstream values prevails. The rebellion presented in the film, whether it be through John Bender (Jud Nelson) who bullies everyone in the group or through Allison (Ally Sheedy) who with her strange gloomy looks does not relate to anyone but informs the group she is a nymphomaniac, in the end is resolved within an overall structure of compliance. Bender can relate to the others and Allison surprises the group with a 'clean' look. It seems the film caught these two rebels at a climatic moment of this transient phase and their rebellious attitudes were a cry for help so they could find their place in society, which eventually they do.

The Breakfast Club is a 1985 teen movie written, produced and directed by John Hughes, for many (and arguably) the master of the teen genre in the 80's. John Hughes was quite a prolific producer and director from the mid 80's to the end of the decade. He directed *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987) *She's Having a Baby* (1988) and *Uncle Buck* (1989) and produced and wrote *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987) which were directed by Howard Deutch and also fit the genre quite well. Except for the comedies *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* and *Uncle Buck*, all the films John Hughes produced and/or wrote pictured teenagers and their life experiences. Interestingly *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* might be viewed as his first film which aimed at an older audience and *Uncle Buck*, with the star child Macauley Culkin, is a forerunner of the even greater box office success, the *Home Alone* series. Hughes' main characters, whether teenagers or children, seem to suffer from lax adult supervision or pitiable parenting.



Figure 19. *The Breakfast Club*. Film's poster

John Hughes' key distinction in making teen movies is his ability to convey contemporary teenage experience from a wide variety of perspectives. The characters and situations depicted in his teen films are supposed to be familiar to everyone. John Hughes' films especially *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink* and *Some Kind of Wonderful* also make class differences the basis of their romantic plots. *The Breakfast Club* can be read as a film in which wealth is not an impediment to the interaction of unlike social strata. Despite the differences between all the five students in detention they all relate to each other, eventually finding they have more in common than they are supposed to. The pairing of Claire and Bender at the end of *The Breakfast Club* can be read as a metaphor for romance rather than the wish of levelling class differences. In the beginning of the film the close-up on Claire's father's expensive car in which she arrives at school contrasts to Bender, who is shown walking into the school premises. At the end Claire offers Bender a diamond earring and seals the offering with a kiss. A similar situation happens between Allison, the misfit, and Andy, the athlete; they kiss, Allison takes a patch from Andy's letter jacket and she is seen with his sweater around her shoulders at the end of the film when they are

saying goodbye. Thus, romance is possible and ultimately class differences make no difference. Hughes contributed to the dissemination of the 1980s middleclass values pre-sold as every one's values. Probably teenager audiences of a worse condition than the ones depicted on film aspired to have the problems the teens portrayed on screen had. I believe that one of the messages the film transmits is that transitional troubles related to teenage years are truly temporary and a solution for them is on hand. The same conclusion can be drawn from the class differences initially portrayed in the film, which can be overcome. The pairing of Claire and Bender as well as Andy and Allison can be read as evidence for that, since commitment might be the next stage in these teens' life and their characterization implies different social strata. The range of teenage characters portrayed in Hughes' films left a strong impression on the youth of that time, and on future teen films. He depicted a wide range of teenagers rich and poor, smart and dumb, cool and coarse, confident and insecure. However varied the depiction of teenagers in his films, he omitted non-white teens from any leading roles.

The Breakfast Club is considered one of John Hughes' best teen movies of the 1980's. The title of the movie was apparently taken from a conversation with a son's friend, who told Hughes that morning detention was referred to by his schoolmates as "the breakfast club". Probably the director kept this title despite the change from morning to Saturday detention (the film is set on a Saturday). The film was a considerable box-office success and did quite well on the cable circuit afterwards (data available in "The Internet Movie Database": www.imdb.com).

2. The Detention Group



Figure 20. *The Breakfast Club*

The detention group consists of: Andrew, the jock, (Emilio Estevez), Brian, the nerd, (Anthony Michael Hall), Allison, the ‘basket-case’ (Ally Sheedy), Claire, the prom queen, (Molly Ringwald) and John Bender, the rebel, (Judd Nelson). I have adopted these designations since they are commonly found in some of works mentioned in the bibliography. When the parents of Claire, Brian and Andrew are dropping their children off at school, the dialogues between parent/child provide the viewer with important information on how these teens have turned out the way they have. The privileged Claire is upset and complains that her father did not find a way to get her out of that situation. Apparently that is the normality in her life, being helped out of any troublesome situations. She skipped school to go shopping.

Claire: “I can't believe you can't get me out of this. I mean it's so absurd, I have to be here on a Saturday! It's not like I'm a defective or anything.”

Claire’s father: “I'll make it up to you. Honey, ditching class to go shopping doesn't make you a defective. Have a good day.”

Claire rolls her eyes and gets out of the car and walks up the school front steps. Apparently ditching school and going shopping in the shopping mall was a sign of the times since spending is part of the 1980s spirit and the shopping mall had become the teenagers’ hang-out place of choice. A decade later, in 1995, the film *Mallrats*, directed by Kevin Smith,

portrays a group of teenagers who hang out in a shopping mall in the United States, the actors in that film have become a kind of “Brat Pack of the 1990s”: Jason Lee, Shannen Doherty, Jason Mewes and Ben Affleck for their multiple appearances in Kevin Smith’s films.

Brian’s mother drove him to school. He complained that detention meant doing nothing for a whole day and not even being given the chance to study.

Brian’s mother: “Is this the first time or the last time we do this?”

Brian (upset): “Last...”

Brian’s mother: “Well get in there and use the time to your advantage...”

Brian: “Mom, we’re not supposed to study; we just have to sit there and do nothing.”

Brian’s mother: “Well mister you figure out a way to study.”

Then Andrew’s father lectures his soon about discipline:

Andrew’s father: “Hey, I screwed around...guys screw around, there’s nothing wrong with that. Except you got caught, Sport.”

Andrew: “Yeah, Mom already reamed me, all right?”

Andrew’s father (angry): “You wanna miss a match? You wanna blow your ride? Now no school’s gonna give a scholarship to a discipline case.”

Andrew gets out of the car and walks into the school. The calculating ambition of his father lingers as the camera moves on to the arrival of the next teenagers.

The last two teenagers to appear on set are John Bender and Allison. At the Shermer parking lot, we see John Bender walking towards us. He is wearing sunglasses and a car is coming towards him but he doesn’t stop walking. The car slams on its breaks directly in front of him. Bender goes out of the frame. Allison steps out of the car. She is dressed all in black. The car drives away. Bender arrives alone. Allison is left in the school parking lot without any words, it is not possible to know if the person who drove her is a relative or not. These two characters are the forlorn members of the group; as will be

shown later, the aggressiveness of Bender and the isolation of Allison are the result of their upbringing and are presented as markers of alienation.

Teenagers in the Hughes films are not to blame directly for whatever they did wrong; it is a simple consequence of the process of what adults have imposed on them and the transitional difficulties they have to go through. After the initial sequences of the teenagers arriving at school, the variety of teen tribes is displayed. With the sequences mentioned above, we also see a little of what lies behind each tribe in terms of family and relationships, pressure and deprivation in a highly succinct form of exposition.

3. The School – Film Location

The film is set in an American suburban high school and most scenes are set in its library where the detention takes place. It is a film with a very controlled environment, in which the teens seem to be taking part in group therapy. They antagonise and provoke, but they also talk about themselves, exchange opinions and ideas and show camaraderie. Eventually, the five find that they may have more in common than they ever imagined and learn a great deal about themselves as well as about each other.

The set was constructed in the Maine North High School Gymnasium, located in Des Plaines, in Illinois. The school had been closed two years before the filming of the movie, and was used for park district purposes before the Illinois State Police bought it and it became a Police Station. This set was used again in the film *Weird Science* and the name Shermer High School was kept. The address that Anthony Michael Hall says at the beginning of the film “Shermer High School, Shermer, IL 60062” is the street that Glenbrook North is on, and the zip code used is for Northbrook, IL where Glenbrook is located. John Hughes was an alumnus of Glenbrook North. The exterior of Glenbrook North was also used at the beginning of the movie when the characters were dropped off for detention. The film’s location gives it a naturally sociological approach – the community in which it is set is defined and controlled, offering an analysis of the social networks of which it is part. Thus, teens become the perfect microcosm for this analysis:

they are old enough to identify with and yet resent the social hierarchies that oppress them but which they are still too young to rise above.

4. The Soundtrack

The film's introductory musical quote from David Bowie's song ("...and these children that you spit on / as they try to change their worlds / are immune to your consultation. / They are quite aware what they are going through") gave cinema goers the idea that what was to come was something special. These lines in the opening of the film are from the second verse of David Bowie's song "Changes" which is a well-known hit song from the 1970s. It was released in 1972 and it is often seen as a manifesto for Bowie's chameleonic personality throughout the decade, and the frequent reinventions of his musical style. A parallelism can therefore be established with the films' teens, their relation with adults and the changes they are going through in their lives. The changes happening in the film corroborate David Bowie's words. The most obvious are the pairing of the rebel with the princess and the athlete with the 'weird' girl. Allison's metamorphosis is another quite impressive change. On the one hand, it can be seen as a disappointment for the film's ending since she is turned into someone completely different both in aspect and behaviour, which is indicative of the lack of consistency in her character. On the other hand, the film conveys the message that despite her initial strange look and bizarre behaviour, change was possible and that enabled her to be accepted by her peers. Acceptance and integration is probably what most teens aspire to. In short, at the beginning of the film she was a unique and unnerving character. After the makeover she was just another simpering, pretty high-school girl in love with a high-school athlete.

The film's theme song, "Don't You (Forget about Me)", was written by Keith Forsey and it was a number one hit for Simple Minds. Both Billy Idol and Brian Ferry refused offers to record it first. Apparently the Simple Minds were not very keen on doing it either, since this was the only song they performed which they did not write. Despite the initial reluctance of the band, the song became a massive hit for the Simple Minds and they are still best recalled for it. The video of the theme song from the Simple Minds resembles

a film trailer and was a MTV success. In fact, most of MTV soundtrack hits aired in the eighties were little more than trailers from the movies whence they came, an example the commercial synergies of the 1980s on which the United States economic recovery was based.

Carla Devito's song "We are not alone" is another interesting song to which all the members of the detention group dance. The boredom of the group is interrupted when Brian gets access to the school's radio and plays this rock beat song. He starts dancing to the song and Claire, Bender, Allison and Andrew do the same. The chorus of the song is:

We are not alone
Find out when your cover's blown
There'll be somebody there to break your fall
We are not alone
'Cause when you cut down to the bone
We're really not so different after all
After all
We are not alone

Interestingly, the differences between the members of the group seemed to become less evident when they dance to the song. Although there is no body contact between any of them, their bodily expressions can be considered similar and they all seem to be enjoying themselves. For about three minutes they merely look like a group of friends dancing to a rock song and enjoying themselves. A more attentive look at the scene may provide evidence for an attempt to present these teens as equals, given that while dancing they seemed to be levelled to the song's message (we are not so different after all/we are not alone). Even though *The Breakfast Club* does not use music as a clear correlative for class transcendence, this scene resembles in its mood some scenes from films like *Flashdance* (1983) and *Footlose* (1984). According to Ryan and Kellner in *Camera Politica*:

Dancing, in film musicals, has traditionally served as a metaphor for the transcendence of everyday routine; it breaks through the constraints of realism, both aesthetic and social, that limit possible actions to a logic of propriety, and it inserts fantasy into the narrative of everyday actions. In contrast to everyday life, it is expressive rather than conventional. It puts in question the rule of necessity that regulates everyday life in the form of social codes of dress, work, movement, etc. For this reason perhaps, dance musicals have been traditional conduits for dreams of hope and the rise from rags to riches. Dance signals the possibility of the emergence of the altogether other

within the everyday, the possibility of redemption from having to live with a reality of limited expectations. (p.112)

Mrs Thatcher in Britain formerly said that there was no such thing as society, as a way to reinforce the 1980s commitment to economic individualism. But, as these scenes show, only hardliners were prepared to go this far and social integration and cohesion remained a very high ideal.

5. Vilifying Adults

At the beginning of the film *The Breakfast Club*, the spectator has a glimpse of what the parents of the teenagers are like. As they drop off their offsprings at school for detention, the audience is faced with short dialogues that indicate the nature of these parents. After that there are no scenes in which parents take part. They reappear at the end of the movie to pick their children up when the punishment is through. Besides the short dialogues at the beginning, it is what the teen characters say about their parents that is salient and they all have something negative to reveal about them. When Bender asks Claire: "Who do you like better, your old man or your mom? To which she replies, "Neither, they are both screwed"; it is made clear that not even the envied, despised and desired, popular, privileged daddy's girl escapes the harmful consequences of pitiable parenting. Interestingly, it is John Bender (whose father gave him a packet of cigarettes on his birthday and who has been physically and psychologically abused by his father) who asks the question. In a shocking scene Bender shows Andrew how he got punished by his father once. Bender: "Do you believe this? Huh? It's about the size of a cigar...Do I stutter? You see, this is what you get in my house when you spill paint in the garage."

In the end, the stereotypes each of the teens represents seem to have a lot in common. They spend a day talking about everything from parental tension to peer pressure or to hurtful stereotypes while serving their time. It is made clear that the incapability of their parents to guide them through the harshness of adolescence is one of the causes not only for them being in detention but also for the supposedly hard times they have been through to this point. The upbringing by negligent parents and adults in general, who stand

accused in the symbolic form of the Dean of Students Richard Vernon (Paul Gleason), the quintessence of what is destructive, demoralizing and confidence-eroding in adulthood, or are revealed as complete incompetents in the case of the parents, results in the stereotypes each one of them represents. A dialogue between Vernon and John Bender portrays the vindictive and cruel attitude of adults who, when confronted with a rebel teen, attempt to intimidate them.

Vernon: "That's the last time, Bender. That's the last time you ever make me look bad in front of those kids, do you hear me? I make \$31,000 dollars a year and I have a home and I'm not about to throw it away on some punk like you...But someday, man, someday. When you're outta here and you've forgotten all about this place... And they've forgotten all about you and you're wrapped up in your own pathetic life...I'm gonna be there. That's right. And I'm gonna kick the living shit out of you, man, I'm gonna knock your dick in the dirt!"

Bender: "Are you threatening me?"

Vernon: "What're you gonna do about it? You think anybody's gonna believe you? You think anybody's gonna take your word over mine? I'm a man of respect around here. They love me around here, I'm a swell guy...you're a lying sack of shit! And everybody knows it. Oh, you're a real tough guy...come on, come on...get on your feet, pal! Let's find out how tough you are! I wanna know right now, how tough you are! Come on! I'll give you the first punch, let's go! Come on, right here, just take the first shot! Please, I'm begging you, take a shot! Come on, just take one shot, that's all I need, just one swing..."

Bender just sits there staring at Vernon. Vernon fakes a punch and Bender flinches.

Vernon:"That's what I thought...you're a gutless turd!" Vernon leaves and locks the closet door after him. Bender climbs into a hatch in the ceiling and disappears.



Figure 21. Richard Vernon (Paul Gleason) in *The Breakfast Club*

Vernon is a wholly inappropriate figure as an educator and disciplinarian. In general, the majority of representatives of adult authority in the Hughes canon are characterized as unsophisticated, bewildered, cringing or vindictive; in short, manifested incapable of accompanying the growth of teenagers. Considering the 1980s as a decade in which the emphasis is placed on personal achievement and individualism *The Breakfast Club* lacks matures figures who represent a rejection of these values. Moreover, the selfish individualism which became the watch word for the greedy 1980s is not the monopoly of adults alone. Therefore, the film denies any kind of sympathetic fallible humanity to mature adults, since it invests solely in the (local and transitory) concerns of teenagers. This is deeply flattering to teenagers and can be critically read as a distorted representation of moral values. As Jonathan Bernstein puts it in *Pretty in Pink, the Golden Age of Teenage Movies*:

His teen leads were smarter, hipper, more sensitive, more articulate and, at all times, morally superior to their adult oppressors. They were also almost entirely denizens of an upper-middle-class white-bread world and the agonies which assailed them seemed tame even at the time – no drive-bys, no drug addiction, no physical abuse, no gangs – but the way they were magnified into melodrama made empathy inescapable. (p. 53)

The controversial “psycho-social”/Oedipal model outlined by Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim, S. N. Eisenstadt, Talcott Parsons, Reuel Denney and Kenneth Keniston in the 1960s, cited by Jon Lewis, in *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*, seemed to have become a kind of orthodoxy at least in John Hughes films:

Youth’s growing dysfunction was the direct result of the failure of adult society. Erikson et al. cite as causes for dysfunctional, deviant youth such phenomena as the breakdown of traditional forms of authority and social regulation; the absence of widely acknowledged rites of passage into adulthood; and the adult generation’s inability to re-present their own culture as inviting, interesting, or even worth living. (p.5)

The adults pictured in Hughes films are self-obsessed and hopeless as parents, and at school, as demotivating educators. They are represented as incapable of asserting their authority and fail as role models which leaves little space for hope in the future, as the following dialogue between Andrew, Claire and Allison suggests. Andrew considers they might become like their parents, Claire strongly denies this and Allison envisages growing up as a gruesomely unavoidable situation. This dialogue offers these three teens an easy explanation for what they consider is wrong in the adult world. They merely refer to their parents as failed role models whose influence they seem incapable of escaping. This deterministic belief presented in the conversation conveys a shallowness and presents these teenagers as frivolous and soft-headed; it seems they are incapable of understanding their own process of growing up due to their inability to see beyond their own realities.

Andrew: “My God, are we gonna be like our parents?”

Claire: “Not me...ever...”

Allison: “It's unavoidable, it just happens.”

Claire: “What happens?”

Allison: “When you grow up, your heart dies.”

Allison’s statement, although flattering to the teenage audience that might have envisaged it as a declaration of the angst of moving into adulthood or as a *puer aethernus* wish of remaining an adolescent is, from my point of view, shallow in meaning and meant to reinforce a teenage sense of injustice.. In their selfishness there is little space for

understanding adulthood and by presenting it as a dead-end they convey their immature awareness of what it means to become an adult.

While talking to each other and revealing their inner selves, the group develops throughout the film into what could be understood as an alternative to or even a substitute for their dysfunctional families. Peer trust and sympathy creates bonds throughout the film; these teens listen to each other, whereas their families, as they say, seemed to have stopped doing that. Together, they deal with their problems with conformity, struggling with their ambivalence about the adult world in which style and money are symbols of success. Even though criticism of the adult world's values are offered in the end there is little to be questioned since they all seem to find their place in the group and therefore in society. The message conveyed tends to be more of a conformist kind – as long as one finds one's own personal place in teen society, one is alright, rather than finding or trying to find valid alternative options in the adult world, which will eventually become their too.

It is the next stage in the process of becoming an adult that I will be looking at in connection with the film *St. Elmo's Fire*. It is a film that situates a group of seven adolescents/ young adults in the phase of life in which high school is recently finished and the responsibilities of entering adulthood start to materialize. It is also a Brat Pack movie made in 1985 with some of the actors of *The Breakfast Club* cast. *St. Elmo's Fire* finally gave the Brat Pack members a chance to “act their age”.

Chapter IV

***St. Elmo's Fire* (1985) - Entering Adulthood**

1. Bonfire of the Vanities – material success critiqued

St. Elmo's Fire is a film which portrays post-collegiate angst in the 1980's in quite a similar way to *The Breakfast Club's* portrayal of coming of age angst during the same decade. This 1985 ensemble film directed by Joel Schumacher revolves around a group of friends that has just graduated from Georgetown University in Washington and their adjustment to post-university life and the responsibilities of entering adulthood. The film, starring Emilio Estevez, Rob Lowe, Andrew McCarthy, Demi Moore, Judd Nelson, Ally Sheedy and Mare Winningham, is one of the defining films for the Brat Pack and also one of the last ensemble films of the genre. Jonathan Bernstein in *Pretty in Pink: the Golden Age of Teenage Movies* considers that "for the Brat Pack, the turn point came in the summer of 1985 (...) the main reason for the Brat's collapse can be summed up in three words: *St. Elmo's Fire*." The film was not the expected box-office success and in order to distance themselves from it the "Brats" split into their constituent identities to continue their careers as solo artists. Despite the debacle, the film can be considered as being ahead of its time, since TV successes such as *Melrose Place*, *Beverly Hills, 90210* and MTV's *The Real World* were eventually inspired by it.

The portrait of the yuppie generation of the 1980s represented in the film suggests that they (white middle-class youth) had a troublesome time transcending the life they had in college and moving into adulthood. Each of the seven characters has to reach independence and/or maturity in order to break from the past and face the realities of adulthood.

2. The group of friends

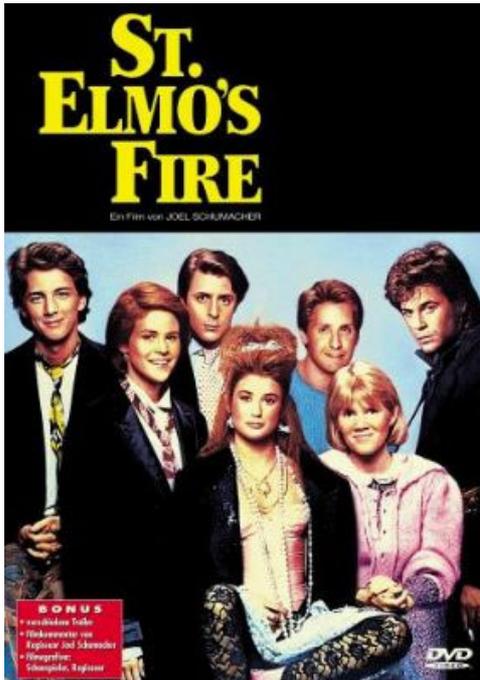


Figure 22. *St. Elmo's Fire*

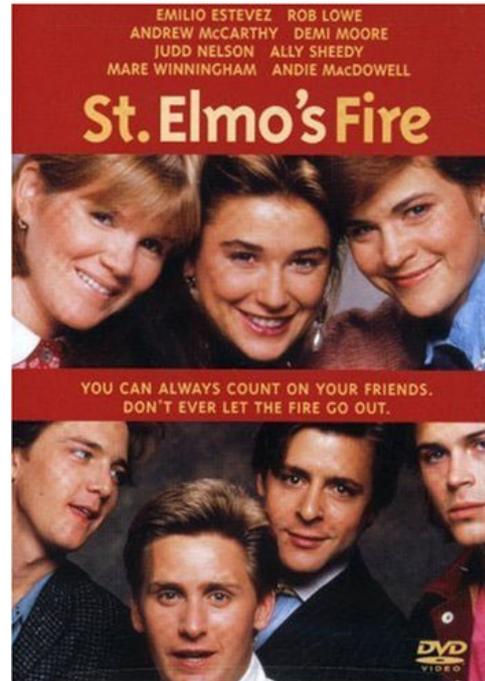


Figure 23. *St. Elmo's Fire*

Kirby Keger (Emilio Estevez) is a waiter at St Elmo's Bar. He hopes to become a lawyer and lives with former college friend Kevin Dolenz. He developed an obsession with Dale Biberman (Andie MacDowell), a hospital intern, and he is willing to do anything to impress her. Kirby's roommate Kevin (Andrew McCarthy) is a writer whose job only allows him to write obituaries, but he is searching for meaning in life and is working hard towards writing an article about such things which he eventually accomplishes by the end of the film. Jules Jacoby (Demi Moore) has an extravagant and wild lifestyle, using cocaine to keep the pace high. She enjoys going to parties and she is represented as typical 1980s society girl, wearing fashionable clothes, shoulder pads and hair sprayed hairstyles; she has a highly decorated pink apartment and works in banking. Thus, she is the archetype for the yuppie generation. Nevertheless, she is looking for the love has she struggled to find while growing up, her father is emotionally distant and he has had many wives. She is under pressure to take care of a family financial issue (her "step monster" as she calls her, who was cruel to her as a child, is terminally ill) and to handle her own finances. Alec Newbury (Judd Nelson) is a ruthlessly ambitious yuppie and young democrat, pursuing a career in politics and desperate to marry Leslie, despite his cheating on her. He sees her as a means to achieving a successful political career. He surprises his friends when he starts

working for a republican senator. Alec decides to negotiate switching political parties in order to “step up”. Leslie Hunter (Ally Sheedy) is Alec’s yuppie girlfriend who wants to pursue a career as an architect before marrying and having children. She seems to be trying to understand who she is before sharing her life with a man. Wendy Beamish (Mare Winningham) is a girl from a wealthy family who devotes her life to helping others. She works in Social Services and is trying to break away from the over-protectiveness of her family, by moving out on her own and asserting her independence, particularly from her father who pressures her to marry the man of his choice. She, however, is in love with Billy Hicks (Rob Lowe) who is the antithesis of her father’s expectations of a son-in-law. Billy is a saxophone player who is unable to keep a job. He is a reluctant father and husband and a womaniser.

3. The Spiral Downwards

St. Elmo’s Fire as an aesthetic and cultural document portrays the conditions of middle class white suburban youth entering adulthood in the 1980s. The attention paid to youth attitudes and behaviours in this film can be read as indicative of some wider social and personal concerns. Timothy Shary, in *Generation Multiplex*, writes:

All dramas thrive on conflict, and the process of maturing is a natural conflict to everyone by their teenage years. While many filmgoers freely participate in screen fantasies about the possibilities of life as a secret agent or of saving a loved one from the clutches of death, most of our lives are filled with less spectacular phenomena, such as how we come to be accepted by society, discover romance, have sex, gain employment, make moral decisions, and learn about the world and who we are in it. These are the phenomena that most of us first encounter in our adolescence, and how we handle them largely determines how we live the rest of our lives. The gravity of adolescence thus makes for compelling drama, even if many of us would rather forget those trying years. Understanding how we learn and grow in our youth is integral to understanding who we become as adults. (p.2)

Most of the most significant experiences through which teenagers go when entering adulthood are present in *St. Elmo’s Fire*. The love triangle between Alec, Leslie and Kevin,

the impossible love between Wendy and Billy, the obsession Kirby developed for Dale and Jules' search for true love, despite her hectic lifestyle, develop through out the film in such way that in the end all seven characters seem to have become emotionally more mature and capable of conducting their lives on their own. Despite romance throughout the film, in the end they stand independent from each other an end-of-the-party tone which sets in by the mid decade. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner write in *Camera Politica*:

By 1985, the cynical reality would emerge more clearly and unromantically in American culture. Madonna would sing of material girls seeking boys with cash in their pockets, and surveys would reveal that young upscale "yuppie" women were increasingly choosing mates on the basis of income. Nevertheless, the struggle to redefine intergender love relationships through cinematic representations would not be entirely pacified. Critiques of romance would appear in Allen's and Rudolph's films and in others like *St. Elmo's Fire*. In these films romance appears less as a solution to all life's ills than as one of their major causes. (p.157)

Leslie's evasiveness about marrying Alec at the beginning of the film despite having moved into his apartment and the refusal to commit to Kevin despite having had sex with him can be read as her own struggle for liberation from male social power and for equality. Leslie tells both of them that she just wants to be living for herself, she wants her freedom. In a scene in Alec's apartment, Alec and Kevin talk about marriage and it is clear that Kevin does not support the idea of marriage, whereas Alec seems to need marriage for his career purposes. He has turned from Democrat into Republican and his emerging political career requires the sort of picture-perfect relationship he shares with Leslie.

Alec: If Leslie would marry me...

Kevin: Is marriage going to make you faithful?

Alec: Yes.

Kevin: I'm sorry; the notion of two people spending their entire lives together was invented by people who were lucky to make it to twenty without being eaten by dinosaurs. Marriage is obsolete.

Alec: Dinosaurs are obsolete. Marriage is still around.

Kevin is the writer looking for the meaning of life and his relationship with his friends provides antagonizing views of what seems to be the return of conservative values and moral in the 1980s. He is thought to be homosexual by his friend Jules and by a street prostitute, just because he thinks and acts differently. In a scene in St. Elmo's Bar, the place where the group usually meets, after Wendy bails Billy out of prison for drunken driving, Jules tells Kevin: "The meaning of life is fun, good times, a little humour. Don't you enjoy anything anymore? Like girls?" to which he replies: "I enjoy being afraid of Russia, it's a harmless fear but it makes America feel better and Russia gets an inflated sense of national worth from our paranoia." Kevin's remark can be read as a statement against the military agenda of Ronald Reagan's presidency, and stands out in contrast to the words of his yuppie friend whose lifestyle and apolitical attitude is to a certain extent the result of the conservative economic policies of the 1980s. Jules individualism is obvious in contrast to Kevin's attitude. The representations of the social consequences of reaganomics have their climax with Jules's breakdown in the end. Jules's collapse can be interpreted as a synonym for the dilemmas of yuppie youth which can not be so easily redeemed by peer group understanding. Jules was fired, but had been pretending to go to work. She was unable to make the payments her lifestyle required so her apartment and furniture were repossessed. In shock, she locked herself in her apartment with the windows wide open, letting the freezing winter air come in. Her friends, worried about her, try to get into her apartment but she just sat on the floor acting autistically. When she finally lets Billy come in she shows exhaustion and grief. Billy comforts and consoles her by comparing her situation to St. Elmo's fire which Billy describes as an illusion:

"Honey, this isn't real. Do you know what this is? It's St. Elmo's fire, electro-flashes of light that appear in dark skies out of nowhere. Sailors would guide entire journeys by it, but the joke is that there was no fire; there wasn't even a St. Elmo. They made it up, because they thought they need it to keep them going when things got tough. Just like, you're making up all of this."

What seemed to be a life of success and achievement turned out to be an illusionary and a shallow life. Billy and Jules's conversation ends with laughter which makes Kirby, who is standing outside the room, comment: "They are laughing". Again, Kevin makes a sarcastic remark: "The hysterical laughter heard most frequently by a schizophrenic paranoid."

In the end, Billy divorces his wife which permits her to remarry to someone more responsible who is also taking care of his baby daughter. Billy recognizes, in a conversation with Wendy, that visiting his daughter on weekends would confuse the child, so he decides to go away. Thus, he is free to move to New York where he hopes to pursue a full time career playing the saxophone. Wendy also managed to have her own apartment and move from her parents' home; her father was disappointed but accepted her resolution. In her conversation with Billy about the future she seems secure about it, having achieved what she fought for. Kirby's obsession with Dale also quietens down and after he met her for the last time he seemed finally to have realised he had to look towards the future. In the final scene the group says goodbye to Billy who is getting on a bus to New York. The opening montage of the group at graduation appears again and the film is brought to a full circle. In an animated conversation they agree to meet the following Sunday for brunch, but this time not at St. Elmo's Bar, Alec suggests: Why don't we go to Houlihan's? Not so noisy, not so many kids." The group agrees. This final scene represents the change from college life into the entrance into the real world as adults.

The Brat Pack moves towards more adult levels of complexity and films like *Wall Street* (1987) *Less Than Zero* (1987) or *Bright Lights, Big City* (1988) convey the shallowness of the promised regeneration of the Reagan years. The decadence of the protagonists in these films can be interpreted as the downside of reaganomics. Thus, the root causes of human confusion and distress remaining the same: the difficulty of finding and keeping love, economic well-being, security, carrying for loved ones, the loss of significance when the struggle is exposed for what it is and the drifting apart of youthful friendships.

Final Considerations

The 1950s gave teenagers a prominent role in film. The years that followed the end of the Second World War were crucial to the development of the representations of adolescence on film. American society suffered many changes during the war years and those transformations manifested themselves, amongst others, in the new freedom adolescents enjoyed, in the ways adolescents lived and behaved. James Dean, who emerged in the 1950s as an icon of doomed youth, has certainly been one of Hollywood's most enduring myths to date. Some important films like *Rebel Without a Cause* or *The Wild One* represented teenagers as a social problem to be understood and contained. The 1950s were a decade in which ideas of social and cultural decline contributed to moral panics about youth. It became natural to regard juvenile delinquency as an urgent and contemporary problem. "Exploitation films" representing delinquent adolescents and the controversy around rock'n'roll were quite popular among young people during the late 1950s and early 1960s. By the late 1950s Americans were earning more money; they bought appliances, cars and moved to new homes in the suburbs. Teenagers benefited greatly from these new affluences which amongst other things increased their mobility, as they could drive to others towns, meet other teens and entertain themselves within a wider catchment area. The 1950s were also crucial to Hollywood since the introduction of television changed audiences and the nature of film productions. Hollywood had to adapt its productions so that they would be more appealing to the one group that was still going to the cinema in a considerable number: teenagers and young adults.

American society naturally underwent enormous changes in the 1960s. The legalisation of the birth control pill gave women a sexual freedom on an unprecedented scale. They were for the first time free to engage in sexual activity without being afraid of undesired pregnancy. This fact alone changed the interaction between the sexes and promoted powerful social and sexual realignments. One of the consequences of these social changes was a desire for more explicit representation of sexual desire in Hollywood's productions. Along with a more explicit use of sex was an unprecedented show of youth violence on film. The war in Vietnam with its gruesome reports shown nightly on television raised awareness of bitter on-going conflicts among adolescents and between the generations. Young people claimed their right to vote, since they considered that if they were old enough to die for their country, they were old enough to vote.

The 1971 implementation of national suffrage recognised the powerful weight of 18 to 21-year-olds. The protests against the Vietnam War and the rise in distrust in government had consequences in Hollywood's film production. Some films of the decade chose to operate on a metaphorical level since their representations of fear are generated by social movements like feminism or a crisis of confidence in corporate business. *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Jaws* (1975) can be considered two examples of this trend. As Michael Ryan explains in *Camera Politica*:

The Exorcist can also be interpreted as an attack on independent feminine sexuality. Author William Blatty based his plot on the story of a fourteen-year-old boy, but transformed the protagonist into a young girl in his novel.(...) Each of the scenes depicting Regan's possession contain derogatory images of female sexuality. Cumulatively, they represent women's sexuality as wild, uncontrollable, and dangerous, a depiction reminiscent of the ideology of witchcraft, which promoted the punishment of women for being too sexually active. This depiction, of course, is a male projection, a symptom of male sexual anxiety. The demonic possession can therefore be decoded as sexual aggression against men, and the exorcism can be interpreted as an attempt to repress a threatening female sexual power. Literally, of course, the problem is a woman with a man inside of her – a woman who behaves like a man. If she is a figure of a deviant power, she is also a figure of a confusion of sexual identity, an additional threat to a gender power system based on the absolute segregation of sexual traits. (p.58)

Like *The Exorcist*, *Jaws* (1975), directed by Steven Spielberg, depicts a society weakened internally by a loosening of traditional institutions and values and a failure of traditional authorities. Those critical weaknesses that undermine society and threaten its integrity are projected onto an evil that only appears to come from outside. (p.60)

The second half of the 1970s saw the production of a series of fantasies of individual empowerment like *Star Wars* (1977) and romantic, nostalgic, or religious transcendence of the world of inflation, unemployment, and loss of national prestige (*Grease*, *Close Encounters*, both 1978). They represent a change to more conservative values and were especially directed at a teen audience that was expected to ignore the political arena. The blockbusters and the multiplexes were two strategies of the film industry to create a changing and more favourable marketplace. The first became an industry standard and initiated a trend for sequels which continued throughout the 1980s

and 1990s and the latter provided the appearance of greater choice of films within a pattern of greater homogeneity.

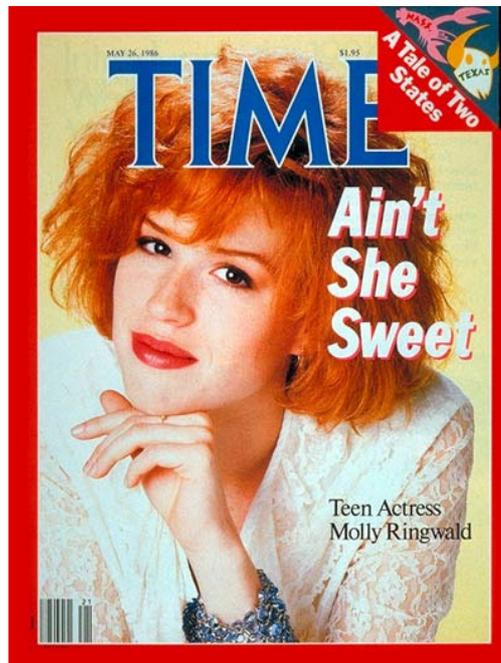


Figure 24. Molly Ringwald
Time Magazine, May 26th 1986 Issue

The 1980s film industry provided adolescent audiences with multiple choices in cinematic experiences and increasingly made niche-type films available. These niche films were specially oriented for particular audiences like the younger female audiences of which films like *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire* might be supposed to be examples. Both films' representations of young Americans portray them and their relationships in a romanticised way that is supposedly appealing to young female audiences. *St. Elmo's Fire* released on June 28th 1985 benefited from the popularity of *The Breakfast Club* released on February 15th 1985, the young actors roles in both films tried to appear meaningful by flattering the audiences with their representations of white middle-class coming-of-age problems as they entered adult life. The actors in these films were better known for their courting of media exposure, rather than for any discernable acting talent. They starred in ensemble films as “novelties” and after a few films, many went out of the industry altogether as their careers waned. Their appearance in some Hollywood productions can be interpreted as a pseudo-event, that is, they gave the impression of being meaningful, at least to the young female audiences, but were in fact trivial. The roles these

young actors were playing were in most cases less interesting and (arguably) less problematic than their own lives, in which drug habits, alcohol addiction, custodial terms for a multitude of misdemeanours including driving offences, etc, high-profile affairs and other activities made headlines in popular newspapers and magazines. These once-promising stars became better known for their own life-dramas than for the sparser roles they were getting.. The disintegration of the brat pack came as a natural consequence of the facts mentioned above. The late 1980s films that deal with the dilemmas of yuppie youth like *Less Than Zero* (1987), *Bright Lights, Big City* (1988) or *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) support the idea that the yuppie heyday was coming to an end; that the dilemmas of middle-class youth were not so easily redeemed with peer group understanding. In particular, the relaxed attitude to recreational drugs (normally cocaine) comes home to roost in these films (and in the life of star Robert Downey Jr, one of young Hollywood's most famous users and rehab enterers (as also were Charlie Sheen, Drew Barrymore, Rob Lowe, Christian Slater and Melanie Griffith, among others). The buzz from scandal magazines was fed back into the publicity machine, making some of these actors' images seem sexily naughty, but also hinting at secrets and vices which led to real life suffering, crime and breakdown. Despite the above-mentioned stars' extravagances and the extraordinariness of their lives, there is a suggestion that what happened to them was happening more widely in the community. In relation to drugs, white middle class use of cocaine was addressed by Ronald Reagan in 1986 when he declared it to be one of the country's greatest menaces. Anti-drug films for adults like *The Boost* and *Clean and Sober* (both 1988) capture and reflect the country's concern regarding the availability and increasing use of drugs amongst professionals. Bearing in mind that films "capture" or "reflect" reality and the 1980s were a decade of inducements to greed and materialism, the representation of American youth in films like *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire* could be said to appeal to, rather than represent, white middle-class American youth. The situation was really much more diverse than what was being represented on screen by Hollywood productions of the 1980s and the representation of teenagers in the 1980s tends reflect the social, political and cultural scenery the America Reagan's administration wanted to promote. This is especially true of the two films I have chosen to analyse in detail. *The Breakfast Club* conveys a reassuring and flattering representation of the teenage high school years while *St. Elmo's Fire* presents the next step into adulthood. This film

situates a group of seven young adults at a stage in their lives in which high school had only recently finished and the responsibilities of entering adulthood start to weigh down on them. Despite the vicissitudes they have to face in the end, all is well and they all seem to have moved forward into another stage, that of dealing with the complexity of adulthood.

Films of the late eighties indicated a shift in sensibility. The popularity of films like *Out of Africa* (1986) and *Room with a View* (1987) indicated that there was an audience for more sophisticated films:

“After years of pandering to youth audiences, Hollywood seemed to begin to realize that (...) a more educated and literate audience was also one less likely to embrace the kind of imbecility on stilts that Ronald Reagan represented”(Ryan:299).

Also, the emergence of African-American youth cinema raised questions about the state of race relations and critical issues about youth choices. The unstoppable violence that seemed to plague urban life, especially poor African-American neighbourhoods in places like Los Angeles and New York, the effect violence and crime had on people living in such neighbourhoods and the incapacity and sometimes indifference law enforcement institutions showed in coping with that violence were recurrent themes in films like *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *New Jack City* (1991), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993). Black youth manifested anger and bitterness not only through music: hip hop, rap, gangster rap, but also through film. *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) was directed by John Singleton, who became simultaneously the youngest and the first Afro-American director to be nominated for an academy award. Eleven years after its release, the Library of Congress deemed the film “culturally significant” and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry. The complexity of social realities in the United States reflected itself in these new films. On the one hand, there was the emergence of new black cinema as mentioned above, on the other hand the New American Independent Cinema productions started to appear. Well-known and much praised directors of New American Independent Cinema are people such as the Coen Brothers (Joel and Ethan) and Quentin Tarantino. The Coen brothers have written and directed several successful films over the past twenty years from comedies, to film noir, to films in which many genres blur. These screen writers and directors often use violence ironically to drive the plots of their films. Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) has been seen as a prominent film in terms of on-screen

violence, with near surreal accidents being used to move the plot further. In the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* (1996), most of the main characters die or are assaulted under circumstances of chaotic loss of control, all of which is portrayed on film. Non-linear narratives which are a recognizable feature to Tarantino's films are also common in Steve Soderbergh's films. Soderbergh is another important writer/director of the New American Independent cinema who has a developed interest in the act and in the moral consequences of lying. The protagonists of two of his early films *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) and *King of the Hill* (1993) are pathological liars. Soderbergh's yuppies are clearly less stereotypical than Hughes's, for example. New Independent cinema brought different perspectives to film and, with its low budget filming, went beyond the film festival circuits and had box office successes which influenced the mainstream producers. Their new perspectives on violence, drug use, sex and nudity in particular established new industry norms.

It's interesting to reflect however that big Hollywood studio productions of the early 1990s still had the choice of offering ever more juvenile fare. With such films as *Home Alone* (1990) and its sequels, Hughes found a lucrative cross-over market (appealing to both young and grown-up audiences). The film is about a boy who has to defend his home from a couple of burglars when he is left home alone by his family who went on Christmas Holiday to Europe and forgot to take him. If *Karate Kid* was a juvenilised *Rocky* for the 1980s, *Home Alone* is an infantilised *Rambo* for the 1990s (they left him behind but he still fights on for home, mom and American (property) values while wrestling with his personal demons). The first film was an astonishing success at the box office grossing nearly five hundred million dollars worldwide by the end of its release year.

As I have tried to show, representations of American youth are a multifaceted and complex. The very processes of representation are slanted and inflected by many social, political and economic considerations. At most, one can say that depictions of American youth in Hollywood productions serve the mainstream values and moral agendas of the day, whereas independent cinema tends to offer challenging or at least different views on the subject. In this sense, we can analyse the conditions under which these representations are constructed. No easy conclusions are available to us as to their accuracy or validity.

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Filmography

Selected Filmography

* *American Graffiti* (1973)

Director: George Lucas

Screenplay: George Lucas

Runtime: 110 min.

Production Company: Lucasfilm

Cast: Richard Dreyfuss, Ron Howard, Paul Le Mat, Charles Martin Smith, Cindy Williams, Candy Clark, Mackenzie Phillips, Bob Hopkins

Budget: \$777,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 115 million (USA) (sub-total)

* *Back to the Future* (1985)

Director: Robert Zemeckis

Screenplay: Bob Gale

Runtime: 117 min.

Production Company: Amblin Entertainment

Cast: Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson, Crispin Glover, Thomas F. Wilson, Claudia Wells

Budget: \$ 19,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 210,609,762 (USA) \$350 million (Worldwide)

* *Blackboard Jungle* (1955)

Director: Richard Brooks

Screenplay: Richard Brooks

Runtime: 101 min.

Production Company: MGM

Cast: Glenn Ford, Anne Francis, Louis Calhern, Margaret Hayes, John Hoyt, Richard Kiley

Box Office (rentals): \$ 5,459,000 (USA)

**The Breakfast Club* (1985)

Director: John Hughes

Screenplay: John Hughes

Runtime: 97 min.

Production Company: A & M Films

Cast: Emilio Estevez, Anthony Michael Hall, Judd Nelson, Molly Ringwald, Ally Sheedy, Paul Gleason, John Kapelos

Box Office (Gross): \$45,875,171 (USA) (sub-total)

* *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982)

Director: Amy Heckerling

Screenplay: Cameron Crowe

Runtime: 90 min.

Production Company: Refugee Films

Cast: Sean Penn, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Judge Reinhold, Robert Romanus, Brian Backer, Phoebe Cates, Vincent Schiavelli

Budget: \$ 4,500,000(estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 29,638,554 (USA) (sub-total)

* *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986)

Director: John Hughes

Screenplay: John Hughes

Runtime: 102 min.

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Cast: Matthew Broderick, Alan Ruck, Mia Sara, Jeffrey Jones, Jennifer Grey, Cindy Pickett, Lyman Ward, Charlie Sheen

Box Office (Gross): \$ 70,136,369 (USA) (sub-total)

* *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986)

Director: Francis Ford Coppola

Screenplay: Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner

Runtime: 103 min.

Production Company: Delphi V Productions

Cast: Kathleen Turner, Nicolas Cage, Barry Miller, Catherine Hicks, Joan Allen, Jim Carey, Lisa Jane Presley

Budget: \$ 18 million (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 41, 382, 841 (USA) (sub-total)

**Rebel Without a Cause (1955)*

Director: Nicholas Ray

Screenplay: Stewart Stern

Runtime: 111 min

Production Company: Warner Bros. Pictures

Cast: James Dean, Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo, Jim Backus, Ann Doran, Corey Allen, Edward Platt, Dennis Hopper, Nick Adams, William Hopper.

Budget: \$ 1,500,000(estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 4,600,000(USA) (sub-total)

** Risky Business (1983)*

Director: Paul Brickman

Screenplay: Paul Brickman

Runtime: 98 min.

Production Company: Geffen Pictures

Cast: Tom Cruise, Rebecca de Mornay, Joe Pantoliano, Richard Masur, Bronson Pinchot, Curtis Armstrong

Budget: \$ 6,200,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 63,541,777 (USA) (sub-total)

** Rumble Fish (1983)*

Director: Francis Ford Coppola

Screenplay: S. E. Hinton

Runtime: 94 min.

Production Company: Hotweather Films

Cast: Matt Dillon, Mickey Rourke, Diane Lane, Dennis Hopper, Diana Scarwid, Nicolas Cage

Budget: \$ 10 million (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 2,494,480 (USA) (sub-total)

* *Sixteen Candles* (1984)

Director: John Hughes

Screenplay: John Hughes

Runtime: 93 min.

Production Company: Channel Productions

Cast: Molly Ringwald, Justin Henry, Michael Schoeffling, Havilland Morris, Geddes Watanabe, Anthony Michael Hall

Budget: \$ 6,500,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 23,686,027 (USA) (sub-total)

* *St. Elmo's Fire* (1985)

Director: Joel Schumacher

Screenplay: Joel Schumacher and Carl Kurlander

Runtime: 110 min.

Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation

Cast: Emilio Estevez, Rob Lowe, Andrew McCarthy, Demi Moore, Judd Nelson, Ally Sheedy, Mare Winningham, Andie MacDowell

Box Office (Gross): \$ 37,800,000 (USA) (sub-total)

* *She is Having a Baby* (1988)

Director: John Hughes

Screenplay: John Hughes

Runtime: 106 min.

Production Company: Hughes Entertainment

Cast: Kevin Bacon, Elizabeth McGovern, Alec Baldwin, William Windom, Holland Taylor

Box Office (Gross): \$ 16,031,707 (USA) (sub-total)

* *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987)

Director: Howard Deutch

Screenplay: John Hughes

Runtime: 95 min.

Production Company: Hughes Entertainment

Cast: Eric Stoltz, Mary Stuart Masterson, Lea Thompson, Craig Sheffer, John Ashton, Elias Koteas, Molly Hagan

Box Office (Gross): \$ 18,553,948(USA) (sub-total)

Secondary Filmography

* *Beach Blanket Bingo*, (1965), dir. William Asher

* *Bonnie and Clyde*, (1967), dir. Arthur Penn

* *Cattle Queen of Montana*, (1954), dir. Allan Dwan

* *Easy Rider*, (1969), dir. Dennis Hopper

* *The Conversation*, (1974), dir. Francis Ford Coppola

* *Die Hard*, (1988), dir. John McTiernan

* *East of Eden*, (1955), dir. Elia Kazan

* *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, (1982), dir. Steven Spielberg

* *The Exorcist*, (1973), dir. William Friedkin

* *First Blood*, (1982), dir. Ted Kotcheff

* *Five Easy Pieces*, (1970), dir. Bob Rafelson

* *Friday the 13th*, (1980), dir. Sean S. Cunningham

* *The Godfather I*, (1972), dir. Francis Ford Coppola

* *The Godfather II*, (1974), dir. Francis Ford Coppola

* *The Graduate*, (1967), dir. Mike Nichols

* *2001: Space Odyssey*, (1968), dir. Stanley Kubrick

* *Halloween*, (1978), dir. John Carpenter

* *Home Alone*, (1990), dir. Chris Columbus

* *I Was a Teenager Werewolf*, (1957), dir. Gene Fowley Jr.

- * *Jaws*, (1975), dir. Steven Spielberg
- * *The Karate Kid* (1984), dir. John G. Avildsen, USA
- * *The Karate Kid, Part II* (1986), dir. John G. Avildsen, USA
- * *The Karate Kid, Part III* (1989), dir. John G. Avildsen, USA
- * *Lethal Weapon*, (1987), dir. Richard Donner
- * *The Long Goodbye*, (1973), dir. Robert Altman
- * *Mallrats*, (1995), dir. Kevin Smith
- * *Muscle Beach Party*, (1964), dir. William Asher
- * *Peyton Place*, (1957), dir. Mark Robson
- * *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, (1981), dir. Steven Spielberg
- * *River's Edge*, (1986), dir. Tim Hunter
- * *Robocop*, (1987) dir. Paul Verhoeven
- * *Superman*, (1978), dir. Richard Donner
- * *Rock Around the Clock*, (1956), dir. Fred F. Sears
- * *Shake, Rattle and Rock*, (1956), dir. Edward L. Cahn
- * *Star Wars*, (1977), dir. George Lucas
- * *Star Wars: Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, (1983), dir. Richard Marquand
- * *Take the Money and Run*, (1969), dir. Woody Allen
- * *Taps*, (1981), dir. Harold Becker
- * *Teen-Age Crime Wave*, (1955), dir. Fred F. Sears
- * *Teenager Strangler*, (1964), dir. Ben Parker
- * *Teenagers from Outer Space*, (1959), dir. Tom Graef
- * *Terminator*, (1984), dir. James Cameron
- * *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, (1974), dir. Tobe Hooper
- * *Trains, Planes and Automobiles*, (1987), dir. John Hughes
- * *Uncle Buck*, (1989), dir. John Hughes
- * *Weird Science*, (1985), dir. John Hughes
- * *The Wild Angels*, (1966), dir. Roger Corman
- * *The Wild One*, (1954), dir. László Benedek
- * *The Wizard of Oz*, (1939), dir. Victor Fleming
- * Source: www.imdb.com (The Internet Movie Database)