

Film Portrayals of Youth

The “teen pic” has become an established genre in the film industry over the past few decades. Since the development of television, “movies have shifted from family entertainment to teen-age pastime” (Leitch, 1992, p. 43). Directed at teenage and young adult audiences, these movies all incorporate the same formulaic elements, despite changes in context, culture, and social norms throughout the years. The teen pic is usually set in a high school with a plot that focuses on relationships, love, pressure, growth, rebellion, and conflict with adults (Leitch, 1992). This film genre emerged in the 1950s, and “for the first time, adults were offering adolescents a pop mirror image of themselves on a mass scale” (Quart, 2003, p. 82).

The teen movie typically utilizes stereotypes to define and develop its characters. In John Hughes’ 1985 film, *The Breakfast Club*, the characters themselves state their stereotypical role in a letter to their teacher, “You see us as you want to see us: in the simplest and most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Correct?” After viewing and analyzing this film, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Mean Girls* (2004), *Varsity Blues* (1999), and *American Pie* (1999), I learned that these are the common stereotypical characters found in teen movies, in addition to “the new girl/boy” and “the girl/boy next door.” Pressure to fit these molds often comes from parents, teachers, or other adult figures, as well as from peers and cliques present in the films. This pressure to conform often contributes to the characters’ development of other formulaic elements such as rebellion, and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sexual behavior.

After *The Breakfast Club*, the clearly defined stereotypes of teen characters became a key formulaic element to the standard teen pic. “Teenage years are typically characterized by a time of relationship and identity growth and struggle” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008, p. 133). These usual stereotypes featured in *The Breakfast Club* are continuously carried out in teen movies today. *Mean Girls* is a classic example of teenage stereotypes. The film’s female protagonist, Cady, plays the role of the “new girl.” In one scene, her new friend Janis draws her a map of the high school cafeteria, labeling each table with its respective clique. Janis states, “you got your Freshmen, ROTC Guys, Preps, J.V. Jocks, Asian Nerds, Cool Asians, Varsity Jocks, Unfriendly Black Hotties, Girls-Who-Eat-Their-Feelings, Girls-Who-Don't-Eat-Anything, Desperate Wannabes, Burnouts, Sexually Active Band Geeks...” (imdb.com). Cady immediately finds herself trying to fit in and associate herself with the socially acceptable cliques. Later when she considers joining the Mathletes club, her friends yell, “You can’t join Mathletes, that’s social suicide!” (imdb.com) This pressure to fit in and make the right decisions socially is a prime example of how the teen pic nowadays has a new fascination with “the high school in-crowd” (Quart, 2003, p. 79).

When comparing teen films of today to teen films 50 years ago, one can see the shift from focusing on the “outsider” stereotype to the “insider” stereotype. In the 1955 film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim is the male protagonist who has a troubled past and is looking to start over. However, trouble continues to find him in his new town, characterizing him as the stereotypical rebellious outcast. These “wrong side of the tracks” characters are a constant stereotype found in teen pics up through the 1980s. Older teen films “spoke to the extremity of adolescent desires and violence” (Quart, 2003, p. 83). Presently, they now focus on “the popular kids...stories of insiders: sports stars, beauties, rich kids and cheerleaders” (Quart, 2003, p. 78). In *Varsity Blues*,

not only does the entire high school admire the football team, but the town as a whole views them as local celebrities. When the quarterback star gets hurt, the second string, Johnny 'Mox' Moxon, is forced to step up and immediately becomes the town's obsession. With Mox as the new local hero, the head cheerleader, Darcey, automatically assumes she should fill the classic role of dating the quarterback. This focus on being part of the "in-crowd" sends the message that with "a new look, an attitude adjustment" and a character can quickly go from "bespectacled neo-hippie to homecoming queen nominee in a short skirt" (Quart, 2003, p. 88). With teen pics now focusing on the stereotypical "in-crowd," the message is sent to teens that "anyone can turn into the popular girl or a prom queen" (Quart, 2003, p. 89). Pressure to conform to these stereotypes often causes the characters ultimately to rebel; they challenge adults' authority, experiment with drugs and alcohol, and engage in sexual behavior.

When analyzing teen films, I found the portrayal of adults to almost always be a negative one. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, the main characters "are careful to ascribe their problems to their parents' failures: Jim's ineffectual father...Judy's sexually unnerved and unloving father; and Plato's selfish, absent, and bitterly divided parents" (Leitch, 1992, p. 44). In *The Breakfast Club*, the main characters all discover that they have one thing in common; they all hate their parents. When confessing to each other, Andy admits that the pressure his father puts on him to be the best wrestler in school is why he bullies other kids. "It's all because of me and my old man. God, I fucking hate him. He's like this mindless machine that I can't even relate to anymore" (imdb.com). The characters discuss whether or not they think they will end up like their parents, a common fear throughout the movie.

"The ultimate problem the teen-age heroes of *Rebel Without a Cause* face is that alienation from the social order of adults and adult institutions can lead to a personal apocalypse, the end of the world. In Hughes' films the terms of judgment are inverted. The problem for Hughes' teens is not merely that particular adults offer inadequate role models; the whole system they represent is so

hypocritical, alienating, and meaningless that growing up would mean the end of the world” (Leitch, 1992, p. 45).

Similarly to the scene with Andy in *The Breakfast Club*, Mox in *Varsity Blues* constantly feels pressure from his father and his coach to succeed in football so much that he often defies his coach’s orders and calls his own plays. He frequently argues with his father, yelling in one scene, “Playing football for West Canaan may have been the life you wanted, but I don't want your life!” (imdb.com). “All of these films valorize the adolescent perspective by restricting adults to one of two roles: either ineffectual figures incapable of protecting their children or threatening figures to be avoided or destroyed” (Leitch, 1992, p. 46). The pressures these teen characters often face from their parents and other adults serve as their fuel for rebellion and challenging authority.

Another noticeable trend of adult roles in teen pics is that they often are portrayed as unintelligent, stupid, or naïve. In *American Pie*, Jim, the male protagonist, is focused on fitting in, trying to lose his virginity, yet act sexually experienced when with his friends. Jim’s Dad, on the other hand, is seen as a dorky character that frequently tries to have uncomfortable sex talks with Jim. In one embarrassing scene, Jim’s Dad gives Jim a stack of dirty magazines and talks to him about the female body. In *Mean Girls*, Regina George’s mom dresses, talks, and acts like a teenager. She is obsessed with looking young and treats Regina as if she is her best friend rather than her mother. In one scene, Mrs. George introduces herself to Cady and states, “I just want you to know, if you ever need anything, don't be shy, OK? There are no rules in the house. I'm not like a regular mom, I'm a cool mom” (imdb.com). This unintelligent, yet humorous portrayal of adults in teen films sends the message that adults are not sufficient role models for teens and cannot be taken seriously (Leitch, 1992, p. 45).

This drive to rebel against adult authority is reflected upon teens' actions in the films. Alcohol, drugs, and partying were present in each teen movie that I watched. In *10 Things I Hate About You*, Kat, the rebellious non-conformist character, caves under the pressure of her sister and goes to a party. Scenes of her taking shots of alcohol, dancing provocatively on tables, and then later throwing up outside all contribute to this notion of rebellion and teen angst; the excitement of doing something wrong. A similar situation takes place in *Mean Girls*, when Cady lies to her parents and hosts a party at her own house. She starts to drink to relieve some of the pressure she feels from her new friends to fit in. An inexperienced drinker, she takes too many shots of alcohol and ends up throwing up in her bedroom. In *The Breakfast Club*, the characters all smoke marijuana together inside the library while Mr. Vernon is sitting in the other room, unaware of their antics. The movie does not feature them getting caught or being punished in any way for their choices.

The scenes featuring drugs, alcohol, and partying rarely show any consequences for the teens' actions. Drinking underage is illegal, as well as smoking marijuana. Yet, these films do not acknowledge this. For example, in *Varsity Blues*, the football players go out to a strip club together where they are served alcohol illegally and watch naked girls dance on tables. Even when one of the strippers turns out to be their health teacher, the boys laugh and cheer her on. Later on in the scene, she takes shots of alcohol with them, once again showing how adults cannot be taken seriously. These films portray the teen characters as older figures who "are on their own, and responsible only to themselves, because their parents have let them down" (Leitch, 1992, p. 46).

In addition to the use of drugs and alcohol, teen pics almost always incorporate some sexual thematic elements, whether it be virginity, love, or relationships. In *10 Things I Hate*

About You, Kat and Bianca's father refuses to let them date until they graduate. He is an obstetrician and delivers babies on a daily basis; he is convinced that his daughters will become impregnated if they start to date. In one scene, he argues with Bianca about what happens at the prom. "Kissing? That's what you think happens? I've got news for you. Kissing isn't what keeps me up to my elbows in placenta all day long" (imdb.com). This humorous, yet somewhat insightful banter sets the tone for the movie. The possibility of love and romance is what drives the girls to persuade their father to let them date. In older films, teens were "confronted with real-life difficulties" whereas today they now "have contests, social machinations, and makeovers" (Quart, 2003, p. 80). For instance, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the romantic relationship between Jim and Judy is just part of the plot. But in recent teen movies like *10 Things I Hate About You*, almost the entire story revolves around dating, sex, and relationships.

This is also true for *American Pie*. The whole movie focuses on four high school senior boys who make a pact with each other to lose their virginity before graduation. Teen films today have put a premium on sex and relationships. In the movie, Jim states, "You realize we're all going to go to college as virgins. They probably have special dorms for people like us" (imdb.com). In another scene, Jim's friend Kevin is told that in order to get his girlfriend to sleep with him, he just needs to tell her that he loves her, whether he means it or not. By poking fun at virginity and making light of sex, these films send messages that sexual promiscuity is socially acceptable and encouraged in high school. In a scene from *Varsity Blues*, the main cheerleader, Darcey, enters the room in a "whip cream bikini" hoping that Mox will sleep with her. Earlier in the movie, one of the football players shares his thoughts on woman, stating, "Bitches are all panty droppers...you give 'em a Percocet, two Vicodin and a couple of beers, and the panties

drop. It's very nice" (imdb.com). Derogatory scenes like these portray women as sexual objects and highlight the stereotypical gender differences that are established in teen pics.

The movie industry has glorified the differences between males and females through teen films. Female characters in these movies typically are seen as beautiful, glamorous, and popular and if they aren't, they endure a makeover to fill this mold by the end of the film. These movies "teach kids the importance of having fancy clothes and wearing good make-up" (Quart, 2003, p. 87). These messages emphasize that for women to be noticed, they must be physically appealing and flawless. This is first seen in the end of *The Breakfast Club* when Claire gives Ally, the basket case, a makeover. "Using a normal amount of eyeliner, a headband, and a white blouse, the princess turns the freak from an androgynous ball of drama into a dull but pretty girl" (Quart, 2003, p. 85). After this scene, Andy, the star athlete, finally sees that he really likes Ally and wants to date her— note that he only comes to this realization after she has the makeover and is seen as beautiful. On the other hand, John, the rebellious character, is ostracized and dresses differently from the popular boys at school. Yet he still dates Claire at the end of the movie without needing a makeover to make him more physically appealing. This superficial message of beauty and appearance stresses the pressure that is put on female characters in teen pics, as well as the strong gender differences present in the films.

The focus of teen films has changed drastically over the past few decades. Years ago, they were representations of teen angst, love, and outcasts. Now, they send misleading messages of appearances, sex, and popularity. These are the molds that teens today are desperately trying to fit. "These characters are emptied vessels, slathered with beauty products. With such characters in the lead, it seems unlikely that mainstream teen films will evoke the cinema of loneliness ever again. All one can hope for, then, is a popular teen film that exceeds the cinema

of the in-crowd” (Quart, 2003, p. 95). One common trend amongst all teen films, despite the decade, is that teenagers are constantly feeling pressurized by adults and peers to fit in and live up to everyone’s expectations.

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(Read: pp. 77-95.)

Rebel Without A Cause (1955)

The Breakfast Club (1985)

10 Things I Hate About You (1999)

Varsity Blues (1999)

American Pie (1999)

Mean Girls (2004)