The Breakfast Club

*The Breakfast Club* is a quintessential teen film. This book analyzes how multiple factors coalesced to solidify the status of *The Breakfast Club* as one of the most emblematic films of the 1980s and one of the most definitive teen films of the genre. The film brings together genre-defining elements – the conflicts between generations and peer pressure, archetypical characters and breaking down stereotypes, the celebration and survival of adolescence, and the importance of this time in life on the coming-of-age process – and became a significant moment for John Hughes as an auteur and for teen films in the 1980s. More than just embodying these elements of the genre, filmmaker Hughes and the Brat Pack stars helped introduce and popularize multiple generic features that would come to be expected with the teen film formula. The content of the film combined with its context of production in the middle of a boom in teen filmmaking in Hollywood. Meanwhile, the marketing that focused on contemporary music, peer group dynamics, and oppositions between Generation X and baby boomers, merged with an enthusiastic reception by youth audiences. Its endurance speaks to the way the film’s level of importance as a critical, commercial, and influential film with tremendous impact has grown since its initial debut.

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Cinema and Youth Cultures
Series Editors: Siân Lincoln and Yannis Tzioumakis

Cinema and Youth Cultures engages with well-known youth films from American cinema as well the cinemas of other countries. Using a variety of methodological and critical approaches the series volumes provide informed accounts of how young people have been represented in film, while also exploring the ways in which young people engage with films made for and about them. In doing this, the Cinema and Youth Cultures series contributes to important and long-standing debates about youth cultures, how these are mobilized and articulated in influential film texts, and the impact that these texts have had on popular culture at large.

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**The Breakfast Club**
John Hughes, Hollywood, and the Golden Age of the Teen Film
*Elissa H. Nelson*

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The Breakfast Club
John Hughes, Hollywood, and the Golden Age of the Teen Film

Elissa H. Nelson

Frontispiece: Poster/One-Sheet for The Breakfast Club
Source: photographed by Annie Leibovitz. Courtesy of Universal/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock
For my parents
Contents

List of figures viii
Series editors’ introduction ix
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: The Breakfast Club and the golden age of the teen film 1

1 The right place at the right time: how the market was primed for the production of The Breakfast Club 15

2 Rules of the genre: creating iconic characters while breaking down stereotypes 36

3 Teen problems in the 1980s, and Generation X and baby boomers just don’t get along 55

4 The synergistic effects of the marketing and the music 70

5 The lasting legacy: historical reception, contemporary impact, and Hughes as auteur 88

Bibliography 101
Index 109
Frontispiece: *The Breakfast Club* poster/one-sheet, photographed by Annie Leibovitz. Courtesy of Universal/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock

0.1 *The Breakfast Club* publicity still; five popular young actors in front of lockers indicate a teen film 3

1.1 Hughes’s cameo; he stuck to writing, directing, and producing – he was going to have a line, but it was cut because he thought his acting was terrible 24

1.2 Overhead shot of the library, with the characters separated 31

1.3 The ‘group therapy’ session at the end, with all the characters together 32

1.4 The ‘therapy’ scene took almost 20 minutes of screen time, allowing for tonal shifts 33

2.1 Andy, Brian, and Claire cover for Bender after he falls through the ceiling; meanwhile, Bender is assaulting Claire as he hides under the table 44

2.2 Blocked from getting back to the library, Bender decides to take the fall, and the future couples exchange romantic glances 50

3.1 Allison’s makeover reveals her face but remains a cliché 62

3.2 Claire gives Bender her diamond earring; her freshly manicured nails contrast with his torn leather gloves 63

3.3 Vernon shares beers and fears with Carl in the basement 66

3.4 The pressure Brian feels is almost life-threatening 67

4.1 The video for ‘Don’t You (Forget About Me)’ contains very little footage of the film, and what is visible is seen only through small television screens 85

5.1 The iconic freeze-frame fist pump 99
Despite the high visibility of youth films in the global media marketplace, especially since the 1980s when Conglomerate Hollywood realized that such films were not only strong box-office performers but also the starting point for ancillary sales in other media markets as well as for franchise building, academic studies that focused specifically on such films were slow to materialize. Arguably the most important factor behind academia’s reluctance to engage with youth films was a (then) widespread perception within the Film and Media Studies communities that such films held little cultural value and significance and therefore were not worthy of serious scholarly research and examination. Just like the young subjects they represented, whose interests and cultural practices have been routinely deemed transitional and transitory, so were the films that represented them perceived as fleeting and easily digestible, destined to be forgotten quickly, as soon as the next youth film arrived in cinema screens a week later.

Under these circumstances, and despite a small number of pioneering studies in the 1980s and early 1990s, the field of ‘youth film studies’ did not really start blossoming and attracting significant scholarly attention until the 2000s and in combination with similar developments in cognate areas such as ‘girl studies.’ However, because of the paucity of material in the previous decades, the majority of these new studies in the 2000s focused primarily on charting the field and therefore steered clear of long, in-depth examinations of youth films or were exemplified by edited collections that chose particular films to highlight certain issues to the detriment of others. In other words, despite providing often wonderfully rich accounts of youth cultures as these have been captured by key films, these studies could not have possibly dedicated sufficient space to engage with more than just a few key aspects of youth films.

In more recent (post-2010) years, a number of academic studies started delimiting their focus and therefore providing more space for in-depth examinations of key types of youth films, such as slasher films and biker
films, or examining youth films in particular historical periods. From that point on, it was a matter of time before the first publications that focused exclusively on key youth films from a number of perspectives would appear (*Mamma Mia! The Movie*, *Twilight*, and *Dirty Dancing* are among the first films to receive this treatment). Conceived primarily as edited collections, these studies provided a multifaceted analysis of these films, focusing on such issues as the politics of representing youth, the stylistic and narrative choices that characterize these films and the extent to which they are representative of a youth cinema, the ways these films address their audiences, the ways youth audiences engage with these films, the films’ industrial location, and other relevant issues.

It is within this increasingly maturing and expanding academic environment that the *Cinema and Youth Cultures* volumes arrive, aiming to consolidate existing knowledge, provide new perspectives, apply innovative methodological approaches, offer sustained and in-depth analyses of key films and therefore become the ‘go-to’ resource for students and scholars interested in theoretically informed, authoritative accounts of youth cultures in film. As editors, we have tried to be as inclusive as possible in our selection of key examples of youth films by commissioning volumes on films that span the history of cinema, including the silent film era; portray contemporary youth cultures as well as ones associated with particular historical periods; represent examples of mainstream and independent cinema; originate in American cinema and the cinemas of other nations; attracted significant critical attention and commercial success during their initial release; and were ‘rediscovered’ after an unpromising initial critical reception. Together, these volumes will advance youth film studies while also being able to offer extremely detailed examinations of films that are now considered significant contributions to cinema and our cultural life more broadly.

We hope readers will enjoy the series.

Siân Lincoln and Yannis Tzioumakis
Cinema and Youth Cultures Series Editors
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Introduction

The Breakfast Club and the golden age of the teen film

Five teenagers being forced to sit in a library for nine hours of detention hardly seems like an exciting premise for one of the most exemplary films of the teen film genre or for one of the most memorable films from the 1980s. But immediately upon hearing the bare-bones plot description, recollections are triggered: Bender pumping his fist in the air as he walks across the field with the familiar chords and lyrics of ‘Don’t You (Forget About Me)’ playing over the still frame, the voiceover of Brian reading an essay giving character types instead of names, Allison shaking dandruff from her hair to make snowflakes on her drawing, five high schoolers sitting apart from one another in the cavernous library at the beginning and then all dancing together on the furniture by the end. That The Breakfast Club (Hughes 1985) can be so vividly recalled even thirty-plus years after its release is a testament to its power and lasting significance. It is an indication that the film was able to touch on something enduring about adolescence, about where people fit into social groups, and about the process of growing up while trying to stay true to the values of youth that all still ring true.

The Breakfast Club is arguably one of the most canonical teen films produced during the 1980s, the most prolific period of teen filmmaking in the US. As such, this book focuses on how elements of the teen film genre crystallized during the decade, how The Breakfast Club became a defining film of the era through its emphasis on character types and generational conflict, and how the particular talent assembled was able to give voice to a poignant and influential portrait of youth culture. Importantly, this study looks at both the content of the film as well as its context of production, i.e., at the textual elements that comprise the film and at what was happening in the Hollywood industry and the country at large at the time the film was made.

The film itself focuses predominantly on teen characters during the 1980s, a time when the Hollywood film industry was gearing more and more of its products to the youth demographic. But more than just featuring a cast of popular Brat Pack actors, the film spoke to the generation coming of age
Introduction

at the time with a story that got to the heart of the conflict between adults and young adults, that understood both the camaraderie and the pressures of peer groups, and that unabashedly dealt with teenagers as real people with real problems. With writer and director John Hughes’s unique voice at the helm, the film capitalized on a culture already targeting the youth market, and by telling its tale from a youth perspective, it was able to leave a lasting impression on both contemporary and present-day audiences.

From a Hollywood industrial perspective, the film was produced at an ideal time. The 1980s witnessed a surge of teen film production that had not been seen in Hollywood since the 1950s. In terms of sheer numbers, teen films made up approximately one of every ten films produced throughout the decade and an average of one of every five to six of the top fifty grossing films per year (Nelson 2011: 2). This focus on teen film production came at a time when the youth market was increasing its buying power, when the youth demographic group had more leisure time and more disposable income to spend as a result of recent upswings in the US economy.

The 1980s also saw significant changes in the Hollywood film industry. While teens had more money to spend, there were fears that box-office attendance would start to plummet because of the new competing technologies of cable and home video. One of the consistent strategies Hollywood uses to combat audience attrition, especially when there is competition from new media (Nelson 2017: 126), is producing films with specific appeal to teen audiences, who have been some of the most reliable moviegoers since the 1950s. Teen films were made during the 1980s with this specific intent in mind.

*The Breakfast Club* capitalized not just on the teen film production trend but also on the talent that was available at the time. Indeed, the decade presented a confluence of circumstances conducive to the spate of teen films produced. The Brat Pack, a group of young actors who frequently worked together and were becoming stars in their own rights, started to gain in popularity. Molly Ringwald, Anthony Michael Hall, Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson, and Ally Sheedy starred in *The Breakfast Club*, and within a few years of each other, also starred in films like *Sixteen Candles* (Hughes 1984) and *St. Elmo’s Fire* (Schumacher 1985). The 1980s was the first time there was a somewhat cohesive group of young talent frequently working together. They had both the star power to raise the awareness and marketability of films and the presence, by very nature of their young age, to signify the importance of the teen trend in filmmaking (see Figure 0.1).

While the talent was available in terms of casting, the importance of writer and director John Hughes must be noted as well. Hughes was adamant about directing *The Breakfast Club*, and even though he had limited experience as a director, he was able to do so because of its small budget. However, he was also garnering a reputation in Hollywood because of
previous work and because of scripts in the production pipeline. His was the talent as the writer and/or director behind films such as *Sixteen Candles*, *Weird Science* (Hughes 1985), *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (Hughes 1986), *Pretty in Pink* (Deutch 1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (Deutch 1987). In the middle of making this streak of popular teen films, he was already being called an auteur (O’Connor 1986), someone with a distinct and recognizable filmmaking style. Instead of writing from an adult point of view, Hughes tried to approach teens and their stories from the perspective of youth themselves, seemingly more successfully than anyone had previously done, and

*Figure 0.1 The Breakfast Club* publicity still; five popular young actors in front of lockers indicate a teen film.
repeated formal and thematic elements, such as delving into the intricacies of teen social groupings, which he continually explored in ways that resonated with audiences. When Hughes passed away suddenly in 2009 at the age of 59, an article in *Entertainment Weekly* summed up his contribution powerfully and astutely: ‘Before Generation X even had a name, John Hughes gave it a voice’ (Rottenberg 2009: 28).

The specific story of *The Breakfast Club* was one that struck a chord with contemporary audiences because of this focus on a youth perspective. One of the primary ways it was able to do so was by focusing the narrative on the five main teen characters. By telling their story, the film calls attention to the trials and tribulations of youth but also made significant inroads into how the teen genre itself is perceived. The film makes explicit, and thereby crystalizes, the elements that audiences have come to expect from the teen genre: the iconic character types, the breaking down of stereotypes to reveal individual personalities, the primacy of the peer group, the power of internal pressure, the conflict between generations, the budding romances, the importance of the high school setting, and the focus on achieving self-acceptance and self-actualization.

*The Breakfast Club* was able to address all these genre concerns, to clearly manifest these paradigmatic teen film tropes, while also offering trenchant commentary on issues of contemporary relevance to teens and to the population at large. While anxieties over the double standards between genders and concerns about income gaps and class disparities are important to many teens trying to navigate their way through the microcosm of high school, these matters were of prominent relevance in the largely conservative and materialistic Reagan-era 1980s. During the decade, disputes were raging over women’s rights and conflicts were brewing about how best to address the unequal distribution of wealth. Essentially, wars were being fought on domestic fronts, and the film did not shy away from these clashes.

While *The Breakfast Club* is not without its problems, including troubling gender politics, underdeveloped depictions of adults, and contrived couplings, it nonetheless still endures as an archetypal teen film. Analyzing its component parts and the context in which it was made sheds light on the teen film genre as a whole, on the 1980s, and helps explain why the film is still so meaningful.

**Situating *The Breakfast Club* within a brief history of the teen film**

The history of both the word ‘teenager’ and of the teen film genre itself is intricate, involving a number of social, economic, political, and cultural forces. Often, the concept of the teenager is traced back to 1904 when
G. Stanley Hall coined the term ‘adolescent’ to note a distinct period of development between childhood and adulthood (Hall 1904). Previously, this liminal stage, while it existed biologically and in preparation for demarcated rites of passage such as religious ceremonies, was not a separate time of life: children often went to work at young ages, educational opportunities were limited, and leisure time, especially for the working classes, was minimal. It was not until the 1920s that the term ‘teenage’ was used to describe a boy or girl and not until the 1950s that term ‘teenager’ entered more common usage (Barnhart and Metcalf 1997: 234). Not coincidentally, these were two decades noted for their economic prosperity, when teens started to be seen as a distinct cohort, and with that, as a demographic group that advertisers could target. One of the ways this marketing trend became manifest was by making films featuring teenagers.

Technically, there have always been people in their teens on film, that is, characters between the ages of 13 and 19 who appear on screen. There is a long and rich history of teens on film and the teen film genre that has been previously detailed in works by Considine (1985), Doherty (2002), Shary (2002), Driscoll (2011), and Nelson (2011). Instead of tracing the complete corpus of films with teen characters and the teen film genre, however, the focus in this book primarily draws on dramatic films, with an emphasis on the thematic topics of juvenile delinquency and on the causes for rebelliousness, because of their more direct influence on *The Breakfast Club*.

A common conception is that the teen film began in the 1950s, the only decade prior to the 1980s when there was such a large and sustained production trend of films featuring teenage characters. Arguably, though, while the genre may have started to take more distinct shape in the 1950s, the teen film can be seen to have its beginnings in the 1920s when teenagers started to become a market force (Felando 2000: 86) and when teenage characters had important roles in dramatic films more broadly defined. Films such as *The Road to Ruin* (Parker 1928) depicts the downfall of a teen girl because of sex and drugs, and the film series featuring the Dead End Kids (primarily between 1937–39) dealt with adolescents coping with the downturned economy during the years of the Great Depression. Importantly, while these were characters in various sorts of trouble, the source of the problems was seen as coming from societal forces, and the hope was that by addressing these large-scale issues, the problems could be resolved.

While young adult women were pivotal characters in films like *Stella Dallas* (Vidor 1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz 1945), two films where mothers martyr themselves for their daughters, the films cannot be said to be teen films because the narrative focus is primarily on the parents (as the titles indicate). However, the importance of the young characters is evident because so many plot points hinge upon them. The films still ostensibly
frame the problematic situation as socially based because of the women’s drive toward upward financial mobility, while also planting the seeds for illustrating how underlying crises, resulting from gender strife and (in Mildred Pierce’s case) post-war consumer culture, were germinating in shifting family dynamics. Significantly, at the time, the resolution of the conflicts ultimately lay in the hands of the parents.

The 1950s marked a near tectonic shift in the representation of teens on film. The historical context of the decade is significant: economic prosperity led to teens having disposable income and to them being courted as a distinct market segment; the move to the suburbs was met with addressing women’s changing social and familial roles, especially after so many found work outside the home during World War II; and in terms of the film industry, the Paramount case, which forced studios to divest themselves of the their theater chains and therefore their guaranteed exhibition outlets, the move away from cities and out of proximity to the most profitable first-run theaters, and the rise of the competing new medium of television, all made Hollywood rethink its strategies in order to stem audience attrition. As Thomas Doherty argues in Teenagers and Teenpics, one of the tactics used was to appeal to teenagers, who were emerging as the most reliable movie-going demographic segment (2002: 188).

The appeals to teens were evident in exploitation films of the era targeted directly toward the cohort, seen especially with films from American International Pictures (AIP) like I Was a Teenage Werewolf (Fowler Jr. 1957), Reform School Girl (Bernds 1957), and High School Hellcats (Bernds 1958). AIP’s ‘Peter Pan’ marketing strategy essentially boiled down to making films that appealed to older teenage boys in order to attract the largest possible audience; the logic was that girls and younger boys would all go to see what nineteen-year-old males liked (Doherty 2002: 128). However, the two most influential films of the decade were mainstream Hollywood fare. Rebel Without a Cause (Ray 1955) and Blackboard Jungle (Brooks 1955), released in the same year, were two social problem films about juvenile delinquency. Rebel, which showed redeemable teenagers who were in trouble, and Blackboard, which showed irredeemable teenagers who were trouble, presented two sides to the growing fears around teen rebellion and the sense of discontent with the status quo of American values.

Again, it is important to consider from where the problems stem and where the solutions originate; both films present overdetermined narratives in these regards. The breakdown of traditional family and gender roles indicates the parents are to blame in Rebel, while the criminal behavior of the teens in Blackboard results from entire government, social, and educational systems that have failed. Reconciliation and reintegration, if possible, occur because the adults reassert their authority. However, the narrative leap the
films make is significant: they both substantiate a new point of view that the problems lay with adults and authority and that the teens’ voices in protest of these shortcomings are valid.

These strains of substantiated protest became even more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s. While ‘clean teen’ (Doherty 2002: 153) films were still released, such as the lighthearted Beach Blanket Bingo series, teen film production in general saw a downturn as a dramatic art cinema with somewhat older youth in primary roles became popular. Called a ‘Hollywood renaissance’ (Schatz 1993: 20) because of the influence of modernism and the European New Waves, films like *The Graduate* (Nichols 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969) featured youth rebelling against the establishment more generally, especially in the wake of Vietnam and economic crises. While the general shape of American society was evidently to blame, the solutions were practically nonexistent and authority and tradition were the enemy.

Meanwhile, teen films were still produced during the 1970s, but they took on a different bent. Brickman argues in *New American Teenagers* that because of the political and financial crises decentering power, civil rights movements giving voice to women and minorities, and the ‘Me’ generation focusing on individual self-help, a unified national identity was giving way and allowing diverse ‘others’ to assert their individuality (2012: 18). As a result, instead of the predominantly white, heterosexual, middle-class male that was often at the center of teen narratives (and studies of teen films), the rise of identity politics led to the production of teen films with more marginalized groups at the center. Youth-oriented films like *Badlands* (Malick 1973), *Ode to Billy Joe* (Baer 1976), and *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (Arkush 1979) told stories about girls, homosexuality, and misfits (respectively). Rather than being reconciled into the dominant culture, the teens move away from it (ibid.: 24), illustrating continued problems with traditional patriarchal authority, which was no longer perceived to be in control.

As the Hollywood Renaissance and the counterculture started to recede in the later 1970s, and as large-scale blockbusters were becoming popular, some more mainstream teen films were again being released, priming the way for the resurgence of the trend in the 1980s. While the closest lineage to the teen angst of *The Breakfast Club* are films of the social problem, juvenile delinquent, and youth rebellion ilk, other types are also influential. Horror films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper 1974) and *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978) deal with punishing female sexuality and show the resilience of the final girl (Clover 1992) to overcome and survive the threat mostly on her own; few authority figures are to be seen or trusted. *Grease* (Kleiser 1978) depicts a variety of social groups in high school and the difficulties inherent in crossing the boundaries between them, along with making the
somewhat rebellious ‘greasers’ cooler than the ‘clean teens.’ Meanwhile, Over the Edge (Kaplan 1979) deals with kids in the suburbs who are so full of anger and boredom, especially after their parents threaten to take away the one place in the community where they are allowed to congregate, that they decide to burn down their school. This film in particular approaches teen delinquency with complexity, suggesting that the problems and solutions are multifaceted. As Jay Scott (1983: 64) points out in his review of the film, ‘the solution is as protean as the problem’; it is the parents and the schools, societal and economic issues, troubled kids and injustice that are all cause for concern, and there is no easy fix.

The variety of teen films in the latter part of the ‘70s foretells the array of genre entries that would appear in the following decade. In addition, the box-office success of these films, along with that of the youth-targeted blockbusters in the 1970s, the competition arising from new home entertainment options like cable and home video, and, according to Shary in Generation Multiplex (2002: 6), the burgeoning multiplex cinemas springing up in shopping malls, all led to the increase in production of teen films in the 1980s. The demographic was again being enticed with films that featured teen characters, this time in an even wider variety with updated stories to appeal to contemporary youth, ranging from teen comedies, dramas, and romances to action-adventure and horror films (and even science fiction and westerns, like Back to the Future (Zemeckis 1985) and Young Guns (Cain 1988), respectively). Indeed, while it is useful to situate The Breakfast Club in the historical trajectory of teen rebel films, it is also important to note its contemporary context: the film appeared during the surging production trend of teen films, and films of the genre took on a range of subject matter and were of various tones.

In the 1980s, there was more variety even within the frame of the teen rebel films. Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986) depicts in comedic form students cutting school for a day, and its title character is filled with joie de vivre, while Risky Business (Brickman 1983) is a twisted take on how to succeed in life and business through lawbreaking with prostitutes and brothels. The action-war films Red Dawn (Milius 1986) and Iron Eagle (Furie 1986) show teens defying government and military orders to save themselves and their parents’ lives. Meanwhile Footloose (Ross 1984) and Dirty Dancing (Ardolino 1987) both show rebellion through forbidden dancing and censored romance. Even the teen suicide storyline had a range: Dead Poets Society (Weir 1989) features a teen who rebels against his father’s wishes and then kills himself instead of suffering through his punishment, and Heathers (Lehmann 1989), replete with a character literally named ‘J.D.’ (juvenile delinquent), presents a satire of teen life and its social constructs. The decade also saw teens on the border and on the flip side of the juvenile
delinquent coin – there are the kids who are in trouble, for whom there is hope and justification outside themselves for their actions, versus those who are trouble and who are irredeemable. Bender in The Breakfast Club straddles the distinction, while a variety of rebel types populate films like My Bodyguard (Bill 1980), The Outsiders (Coppola 1983), and Stand by Me (Reiner 1986).

The scope of the films, both the larger genre and the specific teen rebellion stories, illustrates how the teen film was maturing during the decade. Over this development process, the films could themselves be further broken down into subgenres, for example, the high school film, teen romance, teen rebellion, etc., or alternatively, survival/protection, love/sex, angst/rebellion, ambition/dreams, celebration/leisure (Nelson 2011: 424–425), and were also often categorized as hybrids with other genres (e.g., Friday the 13th (Cunningham 1980) is teen and horror; Grease 2 (Birch 1982) is teen, musical, and romantic comedy; The Goonies (Donner 1985) is teen and action-adventure). Indeed, one of the reasons for considering The Breakfast Club an archetype of the form is twofold. It neatly encompasses distinctive teen film genre elements, such as iconic teen character types and generational conflict in a school setting. In addition, it clearly fits within the boundaries of the teen film without the mapping and mixing of other elements from other content-based genres, such as action or science fiction (versus genres of tone like comedy or drama).

The Breakfast Club, as well as other teen films from the 1980s, also develops the rebellion narrative in marked difference from previous decades. In part, films of the time were able to tackle issues on a more ‘adult’ level because of both the new ratings system that included a ‘PG-13’ category, which allowed for more risqué content, and because ratings were easy to get around, either at the movie theater or via home entertainment options. As more than just a factor of ratings, though, to a greater extent than prior films in earlier decades, the teens are the primary focus of the narrative. Authority figures, although they significantly influence the teens’ lives, are mostly absent. Effectively, as generational conflict foments because of parents’ and authorities’ absence, incompetence, or corruption, the teens form communities unto themselves.

As a result of the teens existing in their own distinct social groupings, the teen films of the 1980s generally, and The Breakfast Club specifically, aim to address teens more directly, take teen problems seriously, and appear to be told from a teen perspective. Consequently, the narratively framed sources of the problems and the solutions for teen angst and rebellion change as well. In the 1930s and 1940s, society and the environment were to blame, and authority had to take charge; in the 1950s, it was the changing family structure, and parents had to reassert their power; in the 1960s and 1970s,
it was the establishment as a whole, and there was little hope all around. In the 1980s, the factors combined and were multiple; teens were affected by failing institutions and the shortcomings of authority figures, as well as by internal and external pressure and by boredom and disillusionment. What was abundantly clear, however, was where the solutions lay: teens had to gain knowledge and figure out problems on their own.

**Structuring the study of The Breakfast Club**

Arguing that *The Breakfast Club* represents the quintessential teen film among all the varieties of films in the genre is a bold statement. Importantly, however, this is not to say that *The Breakfast Club* is a perfect film, nor is it saying that it is exemplary and by doing so, to commit the crime of synecdoche, to say that this one film can stand in for all teen films. However, because it does offer such a representative, crystalized model of the form, and because it of its continued commercial success, it stands out as an archetypal teen film. As such, analyzing both its textual and contextual components can shed light on the teen film genre as a whole and on why this film in particular endures.

Looking to genre theory supports the claim of *The Breakfast Club* as an exemplar. On a general foundational level, the teen film can be defined as featuring characters in prominent roles who are between the ages of 13 and 19 (allowing the main, but not sole, focus to be on the high school years), and the film fits squarely in this demarcation. However, while often there is one primary feature that is used to define a genre – in this case, the age of the characters – there are almost always other descriptors and levels of meaning attached that solidify this status. For example, labeling something a western signifies more than just a film that takes place ‘out west’; further qualifications are needed to denote genre, whether regarding the content of the films, their tone/affect, or their context of production and consumption. As such, saying teen films are about teen characters is a necessary but not sufficient qualification to determine the status of the films as a genre.

Generally, in order to form a coherent or cohesive genre on a textual level, there is a strong tie between what Rick Altman would call the films’ semantic and syntactic dimensions, where the semantic refers to the building blocks of the text, like the iconography, setting, and character types, and the syntactic relates to the ways these building blocks are organized, for example in the plot structure or in the relationships between the characters (Altman 2012 (1984): 31). While the distinctions between what is considered ‘semantic’ and what is considered ‘syntactic’ are debated, the conceptual framework is still highly instructive. As audiences, we have come to expect certain repeated elements in the teen film, and while not every genre film
will have every element, what is notable about *The Breakfast Club* is how many generic elements it exemplifies so explicitly, including iconic tropes of setting, character types, and thematics.

Additionally, besides textually, Altman notes in *Film/Genre* (1999: 14) that there are three other levels upon which genres can be understood: production, marketing, and reception. For example, certain studios can produce, or filmmakers and creative personnel can often work in, a particular genre, and thus their very association or presence can suggest a genre classification. Readily identifiable and repeated elements used in marketing and promotion strategies, such as designs of one-sheets, formats of trailers, publicity, and merchandizing, signal likelihood of film type. And reception, including the discourse of critic responses and audience expectations, also frame understandings of genre. Taken together, these areas are further sites outside the text that enunciate film categorization.

The significance and understanding of labels lie not just in how the films are classified though. A basic way to think of genre is to look at Barry Keith Grant’s statement that ‘genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations’ (2003: xv). But on a more complex level, genre films serve other ritual and ideological functions as well. As cultural products, films are sites for the articulation of ideology; furthermore, as Thomas Schatz explains in *Hollywood Genres* (1981: 263), genres function like myths in that they are ways of addressing and momentarily resolving larger social conflicts and cultural contradictions that often cannot be so neatly resolved in reality. Using the structuralist intervention, and applying it to the study of genre and genre films, shows how the central underlying issues remain over time, but that specific films are contemporary embodiments of those long-standing concerns. By expressing the values of the time and place in which they are produced, films of a genre tackle enduring cultural problems.

As Will Wright explains in *Six Guns and Society*, a study that examines the western genre within a structuralist frame, ‘the structure of myth is assumed to be universal; it can be derived from an analysis of any instance of myth and the requirements of symbolic communication. But the formal structure of myth is embodied in a symbolic content that is socially specific’ (1975: 11). The teen film, then, specifically of the 1980s and *The Breakfast Club* in particular, can be understood to focus on universal cultural problems central to the genre: How do teens navigate the coming-of-age process and become self-actualized? How do they find their place in the world, one that has been damaged by the previous generation, while retaining a sense of themselves and being true to their values? Although conflict with authority is a main concern of the teen film and of the teen rebel specifically, it
is important to note that it is only one (albeit highly illustrative and often repeated) way through which this identity formation process progresses. The teen film addresses the coming-of-age transformation on many levels: the central conflicts are external between youth and authority and between different members of the peer group, and internal as the teens discover a confident sense of self. Also, as with most genre films, the narrative-based resolutions to the conflicts are merely temporary solutions to the larger problems teens face in their everyday worlds.

The Breakfast Club embodies all these attributes, clearly articulating and clarifying the elements of the teen film genre. Looking at the multiple ways teen films are defined and enunciated, what they represent, and how an exemplary film can highlight these ideals, this book approaches an analysis of The Breakfast Club by examining its content in terms of narrative, theme, and characters, as well as its context of production, marketing, and reception. Because of the importance of the teen market in the 1980s, the first chapter will begin with an analysis of the state of the Hollywood industry during the decade, illustrating how the market was primed for the onslaught of teen films and how The Breakfast Club was able to capitalize on the burgeoning success of the genre. In addition, the specific ways the film was able to appeal to the youth market had as much to do with the changing marketplace as with the actors available for the roles. The chapter will also address how the talent and cast came together as the result of opportune circumstances.

Specific content elements are the subject of the next two chapters. The centrality of the cast and the roles each inhabited cannot be overstated in terms of their importance to creating such an exemplary film. As such, Chapter 2 will go into an in-depth discussion of the iconic character types on display. The characters are significant not just because they are seen as representative teen film archetypes but also because of the peeling away of the layers behind these narrative constructions. By first building up and then breaking down the stereotypes, The Breakfast Club is able to both construct and deconstruct teen film tropes at the same time.

Essential to the story and to its time of production in the 1980s are the political, economic, and social issues the country was facing. Chapter 3 takes a cultural studies approach to examine how contemporary concerns dealing with gender, sexuality, and class are addressed in the film, and what it means that certain subjects are ignored, such as diversity and larger political matters. Additionally, this chapter will focus on generational conflict. Generation X was the generation coming of age during the decade, and even though it had yet to be given a label, there were already associations of this cohort with qualities of cynicism and disillusionment. Baby boom-
meanwhile, were still seen as trying to hold on to youthful attributes and, in the process, were shirking adult responsibilities. Conflicts arose as members of Generation X felt like they had to take on mature roles even though they did not have role models to guide them. *The Breakfast Club* illustrates the complex effects of the oppositions between youth and adults.

The emphasis on character types and the attention placed on generational conflict in the film itself carried over into the way the film was distributed and marketed. Posters and trailers for *The Breakfast Club* clearly draw attention to the different character types to try to appeal to a range of teen audiences. At the same time, the film’s ‘R’ rating conveyed its adult sensibilities and mature storylines, in effect broadening its appeal to older audiences. In combination with the top-selling soundtrack and videos in rotation on MTV, the marketing for the film contributed to the way *The Breakfast Club* was positioned in the corpus of the teen genre and is the context of production focus of Chapter 4.

While the marketing clearly positioned its youth market appeal, the immediate response to the film also bolstered its label as a quality film that could speak to multiple audiences. *The Breakfast Club* is one of the few teen films that enjoyed box-office and (albeit mixed) critical success upon its release, has attained a ‘cult’ following, and continues to be lauded, as well as picked apart, in the press. Many of the critical assessments of the film also bring up the importance of the singular talent of John Hughes and his influence on the voice of the teen characters created. Chapter 5 will examine how the critical and popular reception of the film and its director cemented their place in the teen film canon. Additionally, this concluding chapter will look at the impact *The Breakfast Club* continues to have on popular culture. The film is repeatedly referenced either directly or in homages in later teen films, is often the subject of 1980s and teen film retrospectives, and new releases of the DVD and re-releases of the film in theaters occur at regular intervals. The impact and legacy of *The Breakfast Club* persists even more than 30 years after its initial release, serving as a testament to the film’s lasting relevance.

While it can be hard to pinpoint, a succinct description of the teen film is that it is about teens gaining confidence in themselves as they mature; a useful and more specific working definition of the teen film genre is that it is marked by teens who go through a coming-of-age process in which they question who they are and who they want to be, both as individuals and as part of a group. This process of becoming self-actualized occurs as they find an identity distinct from the previous generation, celebrate and survive adolescence, and recognize the significance of their current actions.

(Nelson 2017: 128)
Naturally, the description of a genre should also be applicable to specific genre films, and indeed, *The Breakfast Club* fits this classification. The five teens discover who they are as individuals, learn who the others in the group are, and figure out their place in the larger social groupings of the high school. They do so while braving conflicts with adults, taking time to celebrate youth, and realizing how important the decisions they make and the actions they take in the present are to their future.

More than just embodying these elements of the teen film as genre, what Hughes did with *The Breakfast Club* was help introduce, blend, and propagate multiple generic features that would come to be expected with the teen film formula. The structure of the film, including iconic character types, settings, conflicts, and maturation and development processes, are all displayed and articulated throughout. This content, combined with its context of production in the middle of a boom in teen filmmaking, and the marketing, which focused on contemporary music, peer group dynamics, and generational conflict, merged with an enthusiastic reception by youth audiences. Everything coalesced to solidify the status of *The Breakfast Club* as one of the most emblematic films of the 1980s and one of the most definitive teen films of the genre.
Bibliography

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