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Teenage Wasteland: The 1980s Teen Film as a Revitalized Screwball Comedy

A person purchases a movie ticket to see a film about a boy and girl from different social standings who fall in love, featuring both laughs and roadblocks along their journey to romance. This person is most likely either a Depression Era American hoping to have a laugh after looking for work or a middle class teenager from the 1980s stopping by the theatre while shopping in the mall. Hence, the film is, respectively, either a screwball comedy or a 1980s teen comedy. These genres, despite their radically different decades, share a similar narrative pattern rooted in the financial climate of their corresponding time periods. Both comedies base its fundamental ideologies on the romantic merging of socioeconomic classes. Thus, films like Howard Deutch's *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and Martha Coolidge's *Valley Girl* (1986) offer numerous comparisons to Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* (1936), and Howard Hawks's *His Girl Friday* (1940) in terms of the reconciliation of class differences through romance, the promise of sex and adventure, and the role of parents. However, the 1980s teen comedy focuses more on utilitarian individualism, maximizing one's self-interest, rather than a civic individualism, where the individual contributes to the public good, so that the journey of love does not involve a mutual education, and parents are not a symbol of reformation. Thus, the 1980s teen comedy is a promotional piece of adolescent individualism that accepts consumerism while simultaneously rebuking class conflict and adulthood.

Both the 1930s and 1980s felt the tumultuous effects of the political and economic principles plaguing the era. By the time sound had infiltrated almost all Hollywood films, the

Great Depression hit the United States marking the fall of the stock market and the middle class. However, this did not completely deter middle class audiences from attending the theatre, according to Margaret Thorp, who in 1939 “estimated that forty million of 130 million Americans in the 1930s were regulars, and described the audience as mostly middle-class, white, between fourteen and forty-five years old, and more adult females than males” (Butsch 108). Thus, the screwball comedy became one of the most popular genres of the Depression Era as it socially critiqued class divisions while giving hope of reconciliation of the socioeconomic ranks in America. Set during the height of the Great Depression, *It Happened One Night*'s main characters, a newly unemployed newspaper reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable) and the extremely wealthy heiress Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert), develop a romantic relationship despite difference in social status. In doing so, Ellie rejects marriage to the fortune-hunting “King” Westley (Jameson Thomas), so that the marriage between Peter and Ellie provides a sense of hope for middle class moviegoers. Therefore, the screwball comedy creates a utopia for escaping the poor economic conditions of the Great Depression by promising “the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide ... Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia” (Beach 9). This idea of seeking desire, usually based on romantic and financial wishes, through comedic film permeates in the Reagan Era.

Individualism and consumerism thematically defined the 1980s during Ronald Reagan's presidential reign. Perpetuated by supply-side logic, conservatives, like Reagan, believed in cutting taxes and boosting the free market in order to “give free rein to the abilities of individuals, [they] had the power to liberate people and bring prosperity to whole societies by allowing them to pursue their ideas and creativity” (Bleach 29). However, these “individuals” that benefitted from supply-side economics consisted mainly of previously wealthy families

whose wealth ultimately failed to “trickle down” into middle class American households. This gave way to the rebirth of the class-romances of the Depression Era screwball comedies whose basic narratives become utilized extensively in teen comedies of the 1980s, namely *Pretty in Pink* and *Valley Girl*. *Pretty in Pink* features the romantic coupling of the lower class female Andie (Molly Ringwald) and a wealthy classmate Blane (Andrew McCarthy). *Valley Girl* tells the story of a popular girl from the San Fernando Valley, Julie (Deborah Foreman), and the “Hollyweird” punk Randy (Nicolas Cage) who find love together. However, despite these 1980s characters overcoming class difference to pursue their love, they differentiate themselves from screwball characters as they embody the individualistic nature of Reagan’s policies. These policies starkly contrast the egalitarian utopia presented in the screwball comedies, like the bus scene in *It Happened One Night* when the troubles of the working class seem to vanish as they happily sing “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze.” Accordingly, the 1980s teen films seem to focus more on the main character’s individuality rather than the teenage collective. These films usually conclude with the main couples rejecting cultural celebrations, as in *Valley Girl* when Randy and Julie disrupt the Prom celebration at their high school with Randy beating up Julie’s old boyfriend Tommy (Michael Bowen), starting a food fight, and narrowly escaping the confines of the school dance. Instead of embracing the community, these characters reject it, leaving behind their friends and class to pursue their own individual desires. This individualism however is not just connected to rejection, as it is also attached to consumerism.

Though there are instances of individualism in the 1930s screwball comedies, the individualism in 1980s teen films often reflects one of recklessness powered by consumerist havoc. For instance, in *It Happened One Night* Ellie eventually gains self-reliance, allowing her to run from her marriage to King and fulfill her desire to marry Peter. In contrast, the characters of 1980s teen films frequently must delve into materialism in order to satisfy their self-desires.

For example in *Pretty in Pink*, Andie's "dress gives her the confidence both to go to the prom and to recapture the attention of Blane" (Bleach 43). Without material possession—in this case, the dress—Andie would not be able to fulfill her desire to rekindle her love with Blane.

Likewise, in *Valley Girl*, Julie appears to reject her consumer-obsessed clique by choosing Hollywood punk Randy over preppy suburbanite Tommy. However, Randy and Julie can only satisfy their desire to continue their relationship when, after disrupting the Junior Prom, "the dissident duo jump into Tommy's rented limo and ride off to his reserved hotel room" and thus, Randy "usurps the wealth—car, hotel, girl—he has stolen from Tommy" (*Generation Multiplex* 245). In both films, these characters, like Ellie and Peter, do whatever it takes to reach their aspirations of romance. Still, the less popular characters, or those from a lower class, are revered for their use of material objects, yet the 1980s teen comedy consistently critiques the upper class characters for their indulgence in materialism to build their individual identities.

Although the 1980s teen comedy praises the materialistic individualism of its heroes, it condemns this ideal among the upper class and popular characters through their evil dispositions and overindulgent behavior. This is evident in the characters from the San Fernando Valley in *Valley Girl* and the "richies," a term coined by the female heroine Andie, in *Pretty in Pink*. Julie's friends in *Valley Girl* are obsessed with appearance which the film perpetuates by a montage of them running through the mall, trying on clothes, and occupying their time with superficial purchases while images of swiped credit cards run rampant across the screen. When they are not buying clothes and accessories, they watch the preppy boys walking through the mall and judge these boys based on their looks instead of their character. In doing so, Julie and her friends represent an "image of excess consumption and vapidty," of which the shopping mall symbolized in the 1980s (*Buying Me Love* 567). Through this excessive vapid consumption, the San Fernando Valley teenagers reach their desire of social acceptance. Timothy Shary

describes this individualism as “the struggle for high school popularity—in other words, maximum acceptance... as popular students must appear and act acceptable to a wide range of people while also staking out an individual identity that makes them special and desirable” (*Generation Multiplex* 73). Thus, the popular teenagers featured in these 1980s teen movies maintain their status by using high school as “an opportunity to demonstrate their privilege” (73-4). However, when they demonstrate their privilege, they often do so oppressively.

In order to assert their individualism and rank, the upper class characters of 1980s teen comedies, often build themselves by keeping the lower class and less popular characters from climbing the social ladder while making sure they themselves do not fall off it. For example, in *Pretty in Pink*, Andie’s high school seems to have created a literal division between the “zoinks” and the “richies” where the zoinks, the unpopular and not as wealthy teens, sit outside while the richies remain within the safe confines of the halls. When Blane wanders into the zoink area to speak with Andie, his pretentious friend Steff (James Spader) scolds him for even wandering into their space as it could lead to Blane losing his status. This physical divide is likened to The Dump, where the poor “forgotten men” live in the screwball comedy *My Man Godfrey*, while the wealthy live in pristine extravagant homes. This is not unlike the class division present in America in the 1980s due to individualism as “President Reagan’s Office of Management and Budget, orchestrated a song of individualism and acquisition at the same time that they ignored the choir of voices that couldn’t sing along” (Bleach 29). This promotion of class division leads to an obsession with rank, as seen in *Pretty in Pink* when Blane brings Andie to Steff’s party. A popular girl Benny Hanson (Kate Vernon) asserts her social dominance by acting like she does not know Andie, even though they have multiple classes and some interactions together, and chastises Blane for bringing her to Steff’s party, stating, “I mean you shouldn’t be allowed to invite just anybody.” Thus, her individualism involves keeping those she deems less than her

from possibly rising in the ranks, possibly above her. However, although Benny wishes to stand out as a prominent desire figure within her social class, the 1980s teen comedy still likens Benny's individualism to a longing for acceptance, which most often translates into conformity for wealthy characters.

In most 1980s teen comedies, the popular wealthy characters are often associated with conformity powered by consumerism. In *Valley Girl*, Randy crashes a party in The Valley with his punk friend Fred (Cameron Dye) and explains the reason why the 1980s teen films depict the individualism of the popular and rich characters in a negative light. Upon arriving to the party uninvited, the audience sees Randy with his torn black and red clothes and Fred with similar clothing and partially dyed red hair. Their appearance provides a stark juxtaposition to the San Fernando Valley teenagers fancily clad in pastels and the latest fashions. In one scene at the party, Julie asks Randy "Who invited you?" to which Randy responds, "Oh, you have to be invited. That explains it. Why everyone is dressed so weird. You see, if I had been invited, I would have known it was a costume party." Here Randy divulges the answer as to why the 1980s teen film condemns the individualism of Julie's friends and characters like them. By calling the social event a "costume party," Randy highlights the falseness of their desires. Their use of material items is fake and uninspiring, whereas characters like Randy, and Andie from *Pretty and Pink*, indulge in consumerism to fulfill their desires, but their individualism transcends acceptance and class. Randy sums this up perfectly when he tells Julie that, although the punks and the preps both possess an individualistic nature, "It's the way we do things that makes the difference." They do not conform to societal pressures to reach their goal. Moreover, the heroes of the 1980s teen comedy appreciate the material nature of their individualism to catalyze their romantic resolutions while promising adventure and passion.

While the popular characters of the 1980s teen comedies exploit their consumerism to

fulfill false desires, the main lower class characters take advantage of consumerism to satisfy their cravings through hard work and appreciation. As stated earlier, Andie utilizes consumerism—her dress—in order to achieve her individualistic desire for a relationship with Blane and Randy takes advantage of Tommy’s material possessions to reignite his romantic connection with Julie. In Anthony Bleach’s article “Postfeminist Cliques? Class, Postfeminism, and the Molly Ringwald-John Hughes Films” he justifies Andie’s materialism to meet her goal:

Andie also recognizes the importance of working for empowerment, self-satisfaction, and as a type of personal expression. In fact, her transformation at the end of the film is precisely because of her labors; in a brief montage (whose “real-world” time seems to last days) of sketching, seam-ripping, modeling, cutting, and sewing, we see the immense work that goes into transforming her two dresses into a fantastic new one, made, as she says, “to let them [the richies] know that they didn’t break me.” (43)

Thus, the audience can sympathize with Andie when she decides to reunite with Blane, even after he falls into Steff’s pressures to ignore her. Instead of being born into her wealth, like most of her wealthy classmates, she works diligently and tires laboriously for it. Also, her empowerment comes from within her own work, unlike her popular peers who rely on social acceptance. Additionally, the film justifies Andie’s consumerist individualism because of her appreciation of wealth.

The audience sympathizes with characters like Andie because she appreciates wealth, whereas the wealthier characters abuse it. The moneyed characters of 1980s teen comedies are similar to those of the 1930s screwball comedies. For example, in *My Man Godfrey*, Irene (Carole Lombard) and her financially prosperous peers participate in a scavenger hunt showcasing their complete disregard for material items and even humans as one of the “items”

on the scavenger hunt list is a forgotten man. When Godfrey (William Powell) asks Irene what a scavenger hunt actually is, she replies with “Well, a scavenger hunt is exactly like a treasure hunt, except in a treasure hunt you try to find something you want and in a scavenger hunt, you try to find something that nobody wants.” By calling the objects, including the forgotten man Godfrey, “something nobody wants” she exhibits a complete lack of connection with material items that she uses to reach a goal—in this case the prize for winning the scavenger hunt.

Characters like Andie in *Pretty in Pink* however appreciate material items.

While driving through a nice neighborhood with her friend Duckie (Jon Cryer), Andie comments on the beauty of the houses, stating, “I bet the people that live there don't think it's half as pretty as I do.” Later in the film when Andie, for the first time, gets to enter one of those houses attending Steff's party with Blane, the reckless, bacchanalian behavior of the popular teenagers shows the audience that she is correct. Moreover, by putting time, talent, and dedication into her prom dress, Andie has a personal connection and appreciation of her product. In an earlier scene however, Benny, like Irene in *My Man Godfrey*, showcases quite the opposite when she is shopping for a prom dress with her mother saying things like “This is trash” and “I hate this material.” Andie, who overhears Benny, checks the price tag on one of the dresses to find it costs 600 dollars. Here, Benny represents someone who does not need to work for her goal to have the nicest clothes and more popularity. She just buys it. Thus, Andie's dress that she creates from her co-worker Iona's (Annie Potts) old dress and a cheap dress her father buys does not cost nearly as much money as much as Benny's dress, but it costs more time and care. Plus, the dress itself has a deeper meaning as it helps her reach her goal of romance. Furthermore, the promise of sex and adventure, similar to that in the 1930s and 40s screwball comedies, promotes the audience's belief in the moral goodness of the main heroes' means of reaching their individual desires.

Although the main couples of 1980s teen comedies reconcile class differences through consumerist measures, the fact that their main goal of love and adventure transcend consumerism itself, redeems them. Similar to the 1930s and 40s screwball comedies, the 1980s teen comedy promotes the idea of the “adventure of love” in which the characters ““suffer no change””(Cavell 171). In “Counterfeiting Happiness” Stanley Cavell argues that Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) from *His Girl Friday* has developed some false idea of happiness with the dull, but nice, Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy) and has run back to a previous romantic partner and fellow newspaper reporter Walter Burns (Cary Grant) to save her from this delusion. Similarly, Peter from *It Happened One Night* saves Ellie from a lack of adventure in her potential marriage to King Wesley. For example, in one scene Ellie asks Peter if he has ever thought about being in love to which Peter replies, “Sure I’ve thought about it. [...] You know I saw an island once. [...] That’s the only place to live, where the stars are so close over your head you feel you could reach up and stir them around. Boy, if I could ever find a girl who was hungry for those things.” Both Hildy and Ellie choose adventure—Walter and Peter—over false love with Bruce and King respectively. The same occurs in *Valley Girl* when Julie decides to choose Randy over her previous boyfriend Tommy.

By choosing adventure over dullness, the main couples of 1980s teen comedies indulge in the screwball comedy notion of the promise of sex. For example, in *Pretty in Pink*, Blane rejects his false friendship with Steff to continue an honest relationship with Andie despite class differences. Likewise, in *Valley Girl* Julie tells her friends, who swoon over Tommy, that “Tommy can be such a dork, you know? Like, he's got the bod, but his brains are bad news,” and even voices to Tommy, “I'm totally not in love with you anymore, Tommy. I mean... it's so boring.” She desires something beyond the false, boring relationship with Tommy and spends the entire film answering her question “So what does it take to be so free?” with Randy. In the final

scene, when she and Randy hijack Tommy's limousine, Julie throws her bracelet Tommy gave her out the window, trading in the "counterfeit happiness" she conjured in her mind with Tommy for a romantic adventure with Randy, much like Hildy chooses with Walter and Ellie chooses with Peter. Thus, when the limousine driver asks Randy "The Valley Sheritan?", a hotel where Tommy was going to deflower Julie, Randy responds with the positive. Randy and Julie's goal of true romance transcends false gratification as it indulges in the "promise of sexual-marital communion," a prominent theme in the screwball comedy (Schatz 155). Although not a literal marriage in the 1980s teen comedy, the relationship between the main romantic couples still promises sex like that in the screwball comedy without actually showing sex.

Both 1980s teen comedies and early screwball comedies while playing with sexuality, failed to do anything except promise it. For instance, the "Walls of Jericho" in *It Happened One Night* does not just represent the class division between Peter and Ellie, but when the "Walls of Jericho" fall, it symbolizes their sexual union. The audience recognizes that they will christen their class-defying relationship with sex even though it never witnesses it. This was due to The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, or the Hays Code, which instilled moral guidelines and censorship laws that films released by major studios had to follow. Similarly, in the 1980s "social discourses around AIDS had made youth sexuality an even greater concern and teenage pregnancies were on the rise (the number of unmarried pregnant teens increased by over 10 percent between 1985 and 1990, to one out of every ten girls)" led to a more conservative showing of sex in teen films (*Generation Multiplex* 223). For example, the audience never sees Julie and Randy have sexual intercourse in *Valley Girl* but as they tell the limousine driver the destination of where Tommy planned to take Julie's virginity, the audience delights in the potentiality of their honest sexual union. However, unlike the main characters of *It Happened*

One Night, and most screwball comedies, who have to undergo some sort of change to reach this promise of sex, the characters of the 1980s teen comedies do not.

In most 1930s screwball comedies, the main romantic duos undergo a mutual education on their adventure of love and journey toward the promise of sex. *It Happened One Night* serves as a perfect example of mutual education resulting in the promise of sex. In order for Peter and Ellie to eventually marry and return to the road for more adventure, they both must overcome their previous flaws: “Peter’s cynical demeanor and Ellie’s haughty insensitivity” (Schatz 152). For example, the film displays example of the lines between their classes blurring when Peter teaches Ellie how to properly dip a donut into a cup of coffee and Ellie shows Peter how to properly flag down a car using her sexuality. Likewise, the 1980s “concentrated further on romantic pre-sexual relationships” rather than the actual result of them (*Generation Multiplex* 223). In *Valley Girl*, the film ends right before the sexual christening of Randy and Julie, and *Pretty in Pink*’s final scene features Blane and Andie engaging in a romantic embrace. As the final scene of *It Happened One Night* fades to black, there is a sense of hope that Peter and Ellie will continue their adventure in marriage, but in both *Pretty in Pink* and *Valley Girl* no sign of a permanent relationship is present because of the lack of mutual education between the characters. In fact, each character entirely rejects the class to which he or she belongs.

Much like Walter and Hildy, the main characters of 1980s teen comedies, as Stanley Cavell says, “suffer no change” (171) and do not undergo the process of mutual education. In his article “Buying Me Love: 1980s Class-Clash Teen Romances”, Timothy Shary argues that in 1980s teen romantic comedies, “wealthy people could be reformed through the diligent devotion and pride of the poor, although they would not need to surrender their financial security to do so” (565). Although he correctly notes that the affluent characters do not have to sacrifice any of their physical wealth, he has a misconception that it is “through the diligent devotion and pride

of the poor” that they reform. The word “reformed” suggests that they have previous personality flaws. However, in *Pretty in Pink* Andie does not take any measures to begin a relationship with Blane or change him when they begin dating. During their relationship, each character recognizes the flaws of his or her equals. For example, when Blane and Andie arrive at Steff’s party and the two witness the rambunctious behavior of the popular students, Blane tells Andie, “I can’t believe I actually associate with these people.” He then spends the rest of the night, shielding Andie from associating with them as they attempt to find an empty room at the party to talk and eventually leave the party. Blane then drives Andie to a bar where they meet Iona and Duckie, who is clearly jealous of Blane as he calls Blane a “scumwad” and commences mocking him. Duckie points out that “I devoted my life to the girl and he comes along and thinks he knows her” but even though he continually admits his love and loyalty toward Andie, she ultimately rejects him, and therefore her class, yelling at him, “I can't believe I actually felt bad for you tonight, retarded little dwarf!” When Blane and Andie run to the parking lot afterward, they seem to be in a sort of classless limbo, not a utopia like in most screwball comedies, wandering around confused with no indication of change after a potential education of each other’s class. It is not until they accept each other’s classes and enter into a “timeless apotheosis of teen love” allowing them “to win their hearts’ desire” (Leitch 45). Thus, in order to pursue their individualistic desires, they must fully deny any of their own financial or social concerns and accept each other to be comfortable in their classless limbo of youthful love with no rules and complete vulnerability as a rejection of the entire essence of adulthood.

Both the 1930s screwball comedies and 1980s teen comedies feature patriarchs, and even matriarchs, in need of reform, but whereas the screwball comedy uses them as a symbol of class reform, the 1980s teen comedies use them as a warning against adulthood. In *It Happened One Night*, Ellie’s father (Walter Connolly) “has lost sight of the very qualities (self-reliance,

assertiveness, an enlightened sense of the real meaning of material possessions) that enabled him to attain wealth and prestige” (Schatz 153). Upon Peter’s assertion of his love for Ellie, and vice versa, Mr. Andrews regains “through the lovers those traditional American values so easily forgotten within a chaotic urban-industrial climate” (153). In comparison, Irene’s mother (Alice Brady) in *My Man Godfrey* fails to engage in the traditional American value of marriage, home, and family as she indulges in luxuries and boisterous behavior with her daughters with Godfrey reforming her as well as her husband (Eugene Palette), Irene, and Irene’s sister (Gail Patrick). The 1980s teen comedies also feature a lousy image of parents, but they abandon the entirety of adulthood instead of reforming it, and thus, the characters fail to engage in mutual education, as they represent a “system of values which does not reaffirm or renew standards of maturity but simply marginalizes the adult world by ignoring any possible continuities it might have with the world of adolescence and setting goals which can be reached without growth or change” (Leitch 45) for fear they might become the inadequate adults in their lives. In *Pretty in Pink* Andie’s father is a kind, but irresponsible man, whom Andie “confronts and tries to motivate her father to get a job and get over his abandonment by his wife” (Bleach 40). Instead of providing for Andie, she provides for him as she makes him breakfast and prepares his clothes for the day, and consequently, when she is at home, Andie is the adult. Thus, her relationship with Blane allows for her escape from adulthood, which she attains through her individualism, something that adulthood seeks to subdue. Randy, on the other hand, never talks about his parents and the audience never sees them, and so Randy is free from any pressure to grow up. He consistently asserts his independence and individualism throughout the film without having an adult to hold him back from reaching his goal of romance with Julie.

Through their assertion of individualistic desires, the characters of 1980s teen comedies overcome class differences through consumerist means to find true romance and reject

adulthood. This class conflict present in the films' romances is similar to that of the screwball comedy as each dealt with economic traumas. Like the 1930s, whose class issue came about through The Great Depression, the 1980s felt the tumultuous effects of consumerism and supply-side logic that caused a socioeconomic divide. However, while the screwball comedy seeks to reform these class conflicts to create some sort of utopia, as seen through the mutual education of its characters and the reformation of adult figures, the 1980s teen comedies promote the idea of an ageless limbo where the teenagers can indulge in their individualism without societal pressures of adulthood. However, in doing so, they create for themselves a teenage wasteland, much like Neverland, where adulthood and their current place in the world is completely rejected to lose themselves in an honest romantic adventure. Although their romance holds truth, it is one with no hope for continuation as they fail to grow with no mutual education and ignore the inevitability of their adulthood. Thus, as the camera fades to black, and the audience catches the last glimpse of their romantic union, it creates the illusion that these characters will never reach adulthood and eternally remain in the wasteland they have created for themselves.

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