Buying Me Love: 1980s Class-Clash Teen Romances

TIMOTHY SHARY

THE 1980s BEGAN WITH THE UNITED STATES IN A DIFFICULT PSYCHIC and financial state. American hostages were being held in Iran, giving citizens a sense of shame and anger. The prime lending rate was closing in on twenty percent as inflation was going up by double digits each year, and unemployment was on a steep rise to nearly ten percent by 1982 (Sahu and Tracy 7). And the fading “Me Decade” tensions of the 1970s that had been displaced into consumerist fads and trends—disco being the most visible example—were giving way to a growing realization of class struggle that would become most evident soon after the election of Ronald Reagan at the end of 1980. Reagan’s economic policies systematically served the interests of the upper class while nonetheless appearing to tame the lingering recession through massive deficit spending, and as the 1980s continued, the residual gloom of the 1970s financial woes dissipated in public discourse. Stephen Weatherford and Lorraine McDonnell give two clear reasons for this cultural perception: “Reagan’s personal self-confidence and optimism and the elevation of individualism and self-reliance in his economic ideology” (see also Clark and Corrigan 132). This delicate balance of politics and economics seemed designed to deny the devastation inflicted upon the working class by Reagan’s policies, as later detailed in such studies as America: What Went Wrong? (1992) by Donald Bartlett and James Steele.

However, Hollywood did not wait long to address the ever-evident class divide endorsed by Reaganomics in the early 1980s, when studios began making movies that indicated an increasing contempt for and
suspicion of wealth, especially through exposés on the young upwardly mobile middle class, who were not yet called yuppies. Hollywood movies had always shown a soft spot for the poor, often patronizing working-class characters through cute and stoic depictions, and occasionally celebrating their unrealistic rise to prominence through Horatio Alger fantasies. Yet the 1980s yielded a surprising number of films in which upper-class aspirations were vilified while working-class characters found vindication in challenging privilege (although sometimes that challenge resulted in privilege for the previously poor characters). Consider the following films: *Ordinary People* (1980), with its direct criticism of bourgeois familial repression; *Trading Places* (1983), which suggested that poverty could be humorously surmounted by the self-absorbed rich if they so chose; and *Back to the Future* (1985), where a teenager goes back in time to not only ensure his parents’ union but to replace their previously awkward white trash image with a more nightmarish vision of confident excess—as Leonard Quart and Albert Auster point out, “the parents are much more interesting as ineffectual, shambling failures than as stereotypical success stories” (164). These films required a mild amount of critical reading to reveal their attitudes toward the treachery of class conquest, but later 1980s films then became more explicit in their critiques: *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), *Wall Street* (1987), *Working Girl* (1988), *War of the Roses* (1989), and *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990).

In fact, the cultural re-evaluation of class in the Reagan era had already been most evident in American teen films of the mid-1980s, which often posed their class conflicts in the form of divisive youth romances that inevitably trumpeted the economic rifts between teens only to offer an optimistic unification of these same teens by the end of their stories. The institutional rationale for the class-clash romance that emerged in 1980s teen films may be explained by the eager film industry’s presentation of a youth culture viewed as vulnerable to the tyranny of wealth, when in fact the industry was ironically exploiting the disposable incomes of youth at the movie box office more than ever before. The shift of movie theaters to shopping malls and multiplexes in the 1980s brought with it a deluge of films made for and marketed to teen moviegoers, the majority of whom were statistically middle class, and likely harboring fantasies of class ascension not through hard work (for few teen films of the time promoted education or labor) but through romantic fulfillment. Yet the vast majority of teen romances
in the 1980s that dealt with class conflict ultimately preached to their viewers of the turmoil latent in class privilege, and offered love as a delirious solution to working-class limitations and upper-class ignorance. Love would become the force that overcame class, disempowering it within the narrative conflict, and distracting young audiences from seeing that the poorer member of a teen couple always benefited from his or her association with the richer. The moral in many of these films was that 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.

Virtually all teen movie romances hinge on the difference that keeps two star-crossed lovers apart and/or the conflict that threatens to pull them apart. As in Shakespeare’s archetypal *Romeo and Juliet*, the most common conflict for young characters is family difference, i.e., opposition from one teen’s parents to his or her selected partner, usually based on contempt for the partner’s family or assumptions about the suitability of the partner. Of course, class is often a factor in these conflicts, especially when children try to cross family class lines for supposed future security, a fallacy that led to disastrous results in early teen sagas like *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *A Place in the Sun* (1951), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961). In teen films of the 1980s, family conflicts were more often diverted to specific class issues, as parental characters were frequently pushed into background roles, or in another indicator of the 1980s market mentality, were too absorbed in their careers to play much of a role in their children’s lives. This recognition of parental attention to commerce was likely another factor in class becoming such a central conflict for young characters’ own desires to find marriage partners.²

Unlike family differences, class differences in youth films are almost always immediately recognizable and identified, under such classic signifiers as clothing, hairstyles, cars, housing conditions, and parental occupations. Where familial obstacles are handed down by parents and older siblings exercising authority over younger relatives, class barriers in youth relationships are most often determined by the prevailing social conditions of the narrative. After the recessions of the 1970s and the manic excesses that grew out of them, the American social attitude toward wealth in the 1980s became strikingly ambivalent or cavalier at best, leaving young people with a mixed message to pursue their financial ambitions and develop contempt for them. This translated
into class status becoming a weapon in certain youth films, with higher-class teens using their privilege to deny and reject lower-class peers, or to influence their upper-class peers to reject lower-class romantic prospects. Yet in almost every one of these instances, poverty is shown as humble and endearing, while wealth is pompous and oppressive, and thus must be criticized if it is to be tolerated at all.

The cycle of class-clash romances that emerged in 1980s teen films, and vanished by the end of the decade, offered some alleviation to this absolute division of the rich and poor. These films largely employed class issues in a discourse around the innate homogeneity of youth, revealing that despite differences in consumptive power, all teens have the same goals: to be accepted, happy, and prosperous. As Jonathan Bernstein remarks, “many of the eighties teen flicks expressed a yearning for a pluralistic schoolyard where wealth was no longer an impediment to the interaction of previously segregated social strata, where the jock could lie down with the geek and where the punkette could break bread with the princess” (5). This expression was indeed a yearning within an idealistic teen practice, because the wealthier characters still get more attention from their peers for their ability to follow current fashion trends, throw parties, and drive flashy cars, and poorer characters must work to gain respect and appreciation by denouncing the advantages brought by wealth and demonstrating that they have their own special qualities that transcend class boundaries. Again, the irony of class in these films is that while all youth are shown to be similar on the inside, upper-class youth still retain their privilege on the outside. In terms of young love, when class differences are the dominant conflict preventing the protagonists’ union, the characters must go through a process of recognizing their similarities, with wealthy characters (at least temporarily) repudiating their class advantage and poorer characters abandoning their disdain or envy for class advantage, so that their mutual attraction is based solely on nonclass issues.

Pointing to the latency period in which Hollywood had yet to locate class conflict for 1980s youth, teen films of the early 1980s did little to address class differences, certainly in terms of romance. My Bodyguard (1980) was one of the few films to address any class division between youth at the time, in this case two male friends, while more typical depictions of teen romantic and sexual practice tended to feature youth within the same economic group, such as Endlesslove (1981), Goin’ All
the Way (1981), Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982), and The Last American Virgin (1982). After all, the first few years of the 1980s still felt the effects of the 1970s economy, and the new wave of teen films more often celebrated hedonism and decadence rather than restraint, as with films that began to examine class through male teens’ relationships with prostitutes, wealthy older women, and teachers in three 1983 productions, respectively: Risky Business, Class, and My Tutor. In fact, 1983 opened the cinematic floodgates for exploring youth romance, and the first 1980s teen film to directly address class would do so through a contest between working-class liberalism and middle-class propriety.

That film, which boldly employed a marketing move that was not lost on teenagers of the time, was Valley Girl (1983). Clearly meant to exploit the current San Fernando Valley (California) image of excess consumption and vapidity, as popularized in the 1982 hit song “Valley Girl” by Moon Zappa, the story offers a surprisingly thorough and often sensitive critique of the Val lifestyle and its supposed antithesis, the punk lifestyle of Hollywood. Deborah Foreman plays the main Val, Julie, a high school junior who enjoys spotting boys at the mall with her girlfriends and buying the latest fashions. Julie is somewhat sensitive about her own class status, because her parents insist that she work at their new-age health food restaurant as they extol the virtues of class blindness they upheld as 1960s hippies, which nonetheless allows her to be accessorized with the nicest clothes and bangles that clearly identify her as one of the richest and most popular girls at school.

After Julie breaks up with her highly visible but lecherous boyfriend Tommy (Michael Bowen), complaining of his general dullness, she meets Randy (Nicholas Cage) and Fred (Cameron Dye), two punks who crash an expensive party thrown by one of her friends. Randy is immediately attracted to Julie (their names hint at the story’s debt to Romeo and Juliet) and she senses in him the adventurousness and fun that were missing in Tommy, but her friends make it clear that they do not approve of his punk looks—represented by spiky colored hair and a leather vest—and warn her of the risks to her reputation if she were to date a Hollywood boy. As in most class depictions, the proletariat is viewed by the bourgeoisie as the Other and is reviled accordingly, but poorer characters generally ignore this revulsion and denial of access when it comes to romance. Conversely, the rich must weigh their romantic gain against its potential social loss. The irony in Valley Girl

Buying Me Love
is that Randy is not exactly poor; he simply eschews the bourgeois hallmarks of his Valley counterparts in an apparent rejection of middle-class values, which is an even greater threat. Julie nonetheless pursues her instant interest in Randy, who takes her to a punk club where he expresses the common message about the homogeneity of youth: “We do the same things that you do, just in different ways.”

Julie and Randy’s relationship proceeds accordingly, with her hanging out at his downtown dives and him learning (less so) the suburban culture of Julie’s world. Julie’s friends inevitably threaten to disown her though, and systematically convince her to return to Tommy and preserve their clique’s wealthy image. This sends Randy into a temporary funk (he actually gets drunk and sleeps with an old girlfriend, in a parallel transgression to Julie’s reunion with Tommy), which he rises out of by sending Julie various messages of his lingering love for her, culminating in his crashing of her prom with Fred. Once again the barriers that the middle class have set up to keep out people such as Randy—exclusive parties, high-priced neighborhoods, fancy cars—are violated by the rebel, who slugs Tommy in a fight over Julie and runs off with her in Tommy’s rented limo to Tommy’s reserved hotel room. As they ride away, Julie tears off a bracelet that Tommy had given her, thereby jettisoning her symbolic connection to wealth so that she can renew her love for Randy.

This ending is somewhat problematic in that Julie only returns to Randy after he resorts to violence, which is fueled by his learning that Tommy plans to deflower her after the prom, and thus the supposedly barbaric impulses of Randy erupt to preserve his perceived right to her prized virginity, an odd commodification of Julie that compromises Randy’s otherwise noble romantic longing for her. Now Randy takes advantage of the wealth—car, hotel, girl—he has stolen from Tommy. Where the Valley style may have been a bourgeois attempt to radicalize Middle American notions of 1980s consumption, it nonetheless results in turning Julie and her friends into pop-culture products desperately declaring their personality, which they can only do by aligning themselves against the very style that has ensured their conformed acceptance. This tactic is used to similar effect with Claire (Molly Ringwald) in The Breakfast Club (1985) and many of the characters in films that follow.

Reckless (1984) is notable for taking on the less common venue of a nameless steel town near Pittsburgh, where Johnny (Aidan Quinn,
doing his best James Dean) is eking out a meager existence under the
derision of his alcoholic father, trying to gain acceptance by joining the
high school football team, and stunting his desire to get out of town by
developing a tormented crush on good rich girl Tracey (Daryl Hannah).
(The film has quite a few similarities to All the Right Moves from the
year before, although its characters were from common class back-
grounds.) Reckless concentrates more on film form than content, with
Johnny casting many furtive glances and striking many affected poses
that signify his angst, while Tracey breaks up with her well-off boy-
friend and eventually expresses her attraction to Johnny by joining him
in trashing their high school to the symbolic tunes of “Kids in Amer-
ica.” The class issues here are both overdetermined—Johnny’s house is
barely a shack and Tracey lives on landscaped acreage; Johnny knocks
beer cans off a ledge with his motorcycle and Tracey cruises in her
Cadillac—and at the same time void of real intrigue. Tracey’s attraction
to Johnny seems founded solely on her repressed drive to rebel (again
the barbarism of the working class is romanticized by the rich) and his
attraction is to her drive to rebel.

The film features some well-shot (and quite erotic, for a youth film)
scenes of Johnny and Tracey in their amorous development, with scant
dialogue beyond Tracey’s occasional complaint about her inattentive
mother. Along the way they travel in further symbolism: they set free
caged school lab animals, they go to the ledge over town and look
down on its oppressive steel mill, they have sex in her mother’s bed.
The film is not so much an attempt to neutralize or criticize the
trappings of wealth represented by Tracey as it is a stylish celebration
of both characters’ needs to escape from their polar opposite positions
on the class scale, to a place that is most romantically ambiguous. After
Johnny’s father dies and he sets fire to their house—now freed of
parental oppression—he rides his motorcycle into school and tells
Tracey he is leaving town and wants her to go with him, to which she
agrees with unsurprisingly reckless abandon, becoming the only
wealthy teen character of the 1980s to actually abdicate her high-class
style. However, they ride off into a sunset with no clear destination or
means for survival (at least characters in other “ride off” endings of the
1980s know where they are going, as in Valley Girl; The Legend of Billie
Jean (1985); Can’t Buy Me Love (1987); Say Anything… (1989). Reckless
makes a sardonic statement on the emotional bankruptcy of these
characters that is indifferent to their class position, because neither of
them changes or learns much from their relationship because nothing is of much value to them in the first place. They express that familiar teen need to get out, to anywhere, and considering how their one commonality is that need, they seem doomed once it is fulfilled.

Much more aggressive class conflict is highlighted in *Tuff Turf* (1985), which depicts the tensions between well-off Morgan (James Spader), who has just moved to Louisiana from Connecticut due to a family financial crisis, and the working-class Frankie (Kim Richards), whose boyfriend is Nick (Paul Mones), possessive leader of the Tuffs gang. Morgan, unlike other prosperous boys in youth films since 1980—and most rich teens are girls—seems to be particularly annoyed by his middle-class status and wants to show his parents and his peers that he can rebel just as well as the street kids. He especially wants to show this to Frankie as a way of attracting her, and to erstwhile gang member Jimmy (Robert Downey Jr.), whom he befriends. Soon he gains Frankie and Jimmy’s respect, and invites them to crash a party at a country club, showing them his simultaneous knowledge of and contempt for wealthy customs, and eventually he stands down Nick and the rest of the Tuffs in a fight after they have shot his father.

The class distance between Morgan and Frankie is, as in all class-clash romances, not so prohibitive after all, although the film shows the complexity of class pressures behind their struggle to get together. Frankie must choose between the solidarity of the gang and the comfort of Morgan’s unexpected affection. Morgan meanwhile exemplifies the conflict over parental attention to class because his father’s new position as a taxi driver threatens his family’s previously wealthy lifestyle, and he must defend Frankie to his snobbish mother. In many ways, Morgan’s attraction to Frankie seems to be fueled by his desire to appear more humble and even impoverished, to distance himself from the pomposity of his mother and lawyer brother and, by loving a poor girl, to declare his individuality. This declaration is rather corrupted by the film’s final endorsement of violence, with Morgan “winning” Frankie after he kills Nick. *Tuff Turf* employs brute force to defeat the already brutish working class, only in this case such force is wielded by an otherwise tamer middle class, represented by Morgan’s dart guns against the gang’s real guns. Because Morgan is able to relate to lower-class problems and is openly appealing to Frankie and Jimmy, he is able to escape the typical criticism of middle-class values and secure the cross-class relationship, denouncing his class status but, like almost
every other wealthy character, not abandoning its privilege. In the
film’s last scene, Morgan watches Frankie cut loose with wild dance
moves at a chic club, showing her liberation from class limitation and
his return to a yuppie position with his assimilated girlfriend, both
now free from class constraints.

*Lucas* (1986), one of the most popular films in this cycle, does not
explicitly use class as a barrier to the relationship between its protag-
onists. Rather, high schooler Maggie (Kerri Green) seems more at-
tracted to football player Cappie (Charlie Sheen) simply because he is
older, bigger, and less nerdish than the doting Lucas (Corey Haim).
The nerd has nonetheless suspected that his class position—once again
shown through an alcoholic father and dilapidated home—would fur-
ther bar his acceptance by Maggie and his classmates. While Lucas
spends more time wrestling with conventional notions of masculinity
and popularity than lower-class oppression, his background remains an
implicit factor in both his lack of appeal to Maggie and, more so, in the
narrative’s pathos that generates sympathy for the intellectual outcast.
Maggie is signified as middle class by her car and house, and Lucas tries
to ingratiate himself to her by lying about his lifestyle, although even
after Maggie learns the truth about Lucas she finds him no more or less
attractive—she remains his concerned, but platonic, friend. The film
thus rather completely neutralizes the influence of class difference in
teen romance, but maintains a certain hierarchy of acceptance through
other means such as age, looks, social skills, and virility. *Lucas* is one of
the few youth romances to introduce class difference as a factor and
then essentially disarm it without discussion, even if by the end the
boy has not convinced the girl to fall in love with him, and he must
settle for friendship. The apparent rejection of wealth allows protag-
onists to secure their romantic desire, but the lack of wealth does not
always ensure the protagonists’ romantic success.

Both of these conditions are forcefully borne out in the most de-
liberate class-clash romantic parable of 1980s teen cinema, the John
Hughes production *Pretty in Pink* in 1986, and were immediately
questioned from opposite gender positions in his *Some Kind of Wonderful*
the following year. David Ansen used an ubiquitous comparison in
wryly describing *Pretty in Pink* as “a Marxist ‘Romeo and Juliet’ in
which the warring clans are the haves and have-nots of a Midwestern
high school” (81), and here class divisions are clearly marked by the
areas where poorer students eat their lunch away from the “richie”
students, and in the intraclass dating rituals of the school. Molly Ringwald plays Andie, an attractive and smart working-class senior, whose long-admiring friend Duckie (Jon Cryer) joins her in a certain contempt for the rich students, even though she does not share his more vehement disdain, especially after she develops a crush on the wealthy and shy Blane (Andrew McCarthy). Jealous and hurt, Duckie immediately points out to Andie how different they are from Blane and his snobby friends like Steff (James Spader, playing his role from Tuff Turf with much more class conceit)—Andie of course lives in a dilapidated house with her unemployed but caring father and works part time at a record store, while Blane lives on an estate with horses and often-absent parents. Indeed, Andie's attraction to Blane is rather weakly developed; considering how long she has lived under the strictures of class confines, her attraction is evidently based on nonclass issues. The same is true of Blane's attraction to Andie, and both characters seem determined to prove to their respective foils that they can successfully cross class lines for some subjectively special kind of love.4

The couple, who gradually find a confident interest in each other—he later asks her to the prom and she accepts—are bombarded with instant reminders of their class transgression, most dramatically when Steff insults Andie at one of his lavish parties. This scene is followed by one in which Duckie insults Blane at a night club, a misguided attempt by the poor sidekick to show Andie that he is better for her than Blane, which then leads to a falling out between her and Duckie. The pressure seems too much for Blane to bear, and he begins coldly ignoring Andie after Steff warns him that it is his only option. This disrespect should have been enough for a character as proud and resilient as Andie to forget Blane, which she seems to do temporarily by planning to go to the prom alone, but the film's original ending—Andie and Duckie reuniting at the prom to defy the richies by enjoying themselves—was changed. There is some dispute as to why: one critic claims that test audiences desired a more Cinderella conclusion while another claims technical reasons were responsible.5 Either way, the Cinderella narrative is carried out: after Andie meets Duckie at the prom and hears Blane's affectionate apology, she runs after him, with Duckie's encouragement, and they carry out their optimistic unification in the parking lot while Duckie, not to be left alone, is called over by another attractive girl.
This ending, and the film’s overall effect, thus becomes one of distorted reconciliation between the rich and poor that populate this high school milieu. Despite how badly Blane has treated her because of her class status, Andie nonetheless returns to him because he admits that his rich friends were wrong about her and he tells her that he loves her. Once again the wealthier character does not have to abandon his class privilege as much as he simply has to denounce it, and the poor character, flattered by his attraction to her in the first place as well as his admission of guilt, dismisses the abuse she has suffered because she still thinks their love transcends class lines. Duckie even seems to be a convert to this way of thinking by the end, as were the supposed test audiences who preferred this ending. David Denby questioned if the film ambiguously pointed to larger social issues about class: “Is [it] telling us that the rich always hate and fear the poor—or that in the Reagan period there’s a new mean-spiritedness among the moneyed suburban kids?” (93). The film may have been an attempt to critique the cultural celebration of wealth in the 1980s, but *Pretty in Pink* still preserves a treacherous mythology: that young women want men with money and will reject men more loyal and better suited to them to achieve that financial-romantic goal. Tellingly, when Hughes rewrote the same story from the male perspective the following year, the young man realizes that loyalty and compatibility are more important.

*Some Kind of Wonderful* follows Keith (Eric Stoltz), a talented working-class senior who feels he does not “fit in” at school and hangs out with his long-admiring tomboy friend Watts (Mary Stuart Masterson), with whom he shares contempt for the local richies, at least until he develops a crush on Amanda (Lea Thompson). Among the more significant changes the film makes from *Pretty in Pink* are the poor protagonist’s family situation—his father is overattentive to his son’s future, and pushes him to take the responsible financial path (i.e., college) that he wishes he had followed—and his crush’s romantic and financial situation—unlike Blane, Amanda is not so rich, but has a steady richie boyfriend, Hardy (Craig Sheffer), who grants her access to the richies’ clique. Hardy does not treat Amanda very well, and part of Keith’s attraction to her seems inspired by his desire to show the money-minded girl that she deserves better affection. Keith remains oblivious to Watts’s own interest in him, because she is a visibly less feminine alternative to Amanda and has been a pal for so long that
Keith does not realize her sexual appeal. Then, in a scene where Watts shows Keith how to kiss, her sexual yearning and potential are amply conveyed to him, to which he can only awkwardly respond, “You’re pretty,” a clue to his own sexual awakening.

The narrative makes Keith’s commitment to Amanda riskier and more excessive than the emotional investment of Andie in the previous film: he sells off his meager college fund, much to his father’s disgust, to take Amanda on a lavish date after she breaks up with the annoying Hardy. This move on Amanda’s part makes her vulnerable to being frozen out of the rich clique, yet Keith responds by mistakenly thinking she will be impressed with his own capacity to spend money on her. In two of the film’s more unusual touches, Watts agrees to chauffeur them in Keith’s rented limousine, ostensibly so that she can keep an eye on Keith but also so that she can vicariously (if masochistically) enjoy his attention to Amanda, and Keith gradually makes Amanda feel uncomfortable with his antagonizing comments about the high-class lifestyle she must have enjoyed with Hardy; none of these characters know how to get what they think they want. When at the end of the date Keith produces a pair of expensive earrings, telling Amanda, “This is my future,” he seems to have made the biggest mistake of his life. Amanda is flattered though still not attracted to Keith, if only because he fails to understand that such financial demonstrations appear relatively disingenuous to a middle-class girl trying to resist upper-class impulses. Keith then makes a more dramatic show of his affection by taking Amanda to a party at Hardy’s house, where he slugs the mean ex-boyfriend before his punk pals show up to save him from an ensuing fight. In the last scene, Amanda tells Keith that she is better off alone—a rare declaration of independence for any leading character in a romantic film—and he finally realizes that Watts was better for him all along, so he runs off and gives her the earrings, which she dons with joy.

This ending makes somewhat conservative statements about sexuality and class. While Watts has not endured a transformation from her previous image in order to attract Keith—she is actually wearing a rather masculine chauffeur’s uniform through the end of the film—Keith’s gift of the earrings, and her immediate wearing of them, are the first steps toward a presumably more feminized role that she is expected to take in their relationship. (Another reading could be that Watts’s overdue attainment of heterosexual romance is steering her
away from her apparent lesbian destiny.) There is also a class corrective to *Pretty in Pink* offered by this ending, with the poor character realizing that true love has been waiting for him all along and not in the artificial attainment of an upwardly mobile girlfriend. The fact that the protagonist is now a boy, however, can be seen as a gendered construction in which young men (eventually) recognize such true love regardless of class interests, whereas in *Pretty in Pink* Andie still rejects Duckie for the less appealing but richer Blane. Keith rather capriciously switches his attraction from Amanda to Watts and she graciously accepts it, and we are led to believe that he is still willing to forego a college education for the sake of having a girlfriend who never wanted his money in the first place. Further, the introduction of Keith’s punk friends in *Some Kind of Wonderful* offers another statement on class: these representatives of class rebellion align with his otherwise staid style simply because he understands their class struggle, and when they crash Hardy’s party to defend Keith, their arrival becomes an invasion of the lower class upon the upper, once again employing the notion that brute force is the most imminent threat the poor pose to the sensitive rich. “As in *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* [1986],” Jon Lewis points out, “Hughes’s heroes eventually transcend the rigid high school order and are befriended by delinquents who are really more like them than they or we had expected” (141). And this befriending process is indexically linked to the characters’ class positions.

One of the last 1980s films that directly addressed class as an issue in teen romance was the 1987 sleeper *Can’t Buy Me Love*, which was known as “Boy Rents Girl” during production and was released six months after *Some Kind of Wonderful* (Maltin 194). The film is a study of how Ronald (Patrick Dempsey) socializes to high school acceptance through the loss of his nerd image and his association with the pretty and popular Cindy (Amanda Peterson), whom he pays $1,000 to pose as his girlfriend for a month. (Ronald had been saving his hard-earned lawn mowing money for a telescope, and a further contrivance is set up where Cindy ruins one of her mother’s expensive dresses, and thus she “needs” the money Ronald offers.) Ronald’s accurate assumption is that his temporary connection to Cindy will gain him a cool cachet at school, and, while at first he also seems motivated by a sheer attraction to her, by the end of the month Ronald has become far more absorbed with maintaining his new social status than with enjoying the
unexpected affection that Cindy has developed for him. In his tactic to gain acceptance, Ronald exploits a rather predominant image of the bourgeoisie: acceptance is a matter of association with “popular power” such as wealth (in the form of fashion, cars, and affluent friends) as opposed to the “instinctual power” wielded by the proletariat (such as intellect or rebellion—virtually all screen teen nerds are working class). Cindy, who is not too much wealthier than Ronald (they live next to each other in similar houses), has clearly used her class status to maintain a popular image at school, while the slightly poorer Ronald changes the ambitions of his labor from scientific knowledge (the telescope) to social conquest (Cindy).

The overtones of prostitution and even slavery that Can’t Buy Me Love uses to carry out its message of gaining true acceptance through self-respect and pride corrupt much of its sometimes sincere critique about the literal “cost” of popularity. Ronald has to ultimately give up his fake posturing as one of the cool kids at school when Cindy exposes his scam, but he saves face when he defends one of his fellow nerds (whom he had rebuffed during his month of popularity) against a football player, delivering a speech about accepting differences which, while insightful for a high school student, rings rather trite as a moral lesson. Janice Berman points out that Ronald’s public disdain of the school caste system “would never have [occurred] had his scam gone undetected. It’s a rather manipulative confrontation, despite its positive outcome” (3). This tricky tactic notwithstanding, Cindy rather believably falls for Ronald’s natural charms, which have only come out as a result of his gaining the acceptance that she brought to him. Thus, in the end, Ronald has indeed been able to buy love as well as self-respect, since Cindy returns to him in his previous role as a lawn-mowing nerd. Here the Richie realizes that class and image are not so important to love, although she has still been inadvertently lured to love by class after Ronald has changed his image. The tension behind this artificial and misinformed resolution was summed up well by Roger Ebert in his review:

It may be true in our society that people marry for money. That they seek for successful people to go out with. That they try to buy popularity. But when you are a teenager love is no respecter of greed, and the heart beats strong and true. The makers of Can’t Buy Me Love never knew that, or have forgotten it. (31)
This critical response points to the changing social attitudes in which these films were received, since the class-clash narratives had begun declining in popularity after the success of *Pretty in Pink*. As the 1980s came to a close, teen movies in general had lost much of their social and financial momentum from earlier in the decade, and class conflicts for youth in films at the end of the decade were often combined with more complex character issues, as in *China Girl* (1987) with its urban racial divisions; *The Prince of Pennsylvania* (1988) with its dysfunctional family; *Immediate Family* (1989) with its open adoption controversy; *Lost Angels* (1989) with its focus on juvenile penology; and *The Forbidden Dance* (1990) with its lambadacized concerns about the rain forests. Or class became a more veiled explanation for the struggle of young lovers, whether they were from similar class backgrounds or not: consider *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Mystic Pizza* (1988), *Heathers* (1989), *Say Anything . . .* (1989), and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). The etiology for this change in teens’ romantic pairings could lie in the dissolution (or disillusion) of the Reagan ethos, with films geared to adults in the late 1980s taking more hard-line stances on the corruption of class differences—e.g., *Baby Boom* (1987), *Wall Street* (1987), *Maid to Order* (1987), *Working Girl* (1988), *War of the Roses* (1989), *Pacific Heights* (1990), *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), *A Shock to the System* (1990)—stances which teen films had already explored for the past few years and thus found relatively resolved. Of course, the Hughes films themselves may have exhausted the topic, and as the later 1980s teen films indicate, class became just another issue in the comprehensive conflicts that inevitably influence young romantic struggles.

The dismissing of class as a factor in teen movie romances has remained rather consistent ever since. Even during the profound wave of early 1990s films depicting African American teens in criminal surroundings (*Boyz N the Hood* [1991]; *Straight Out of Brooklyn* [1991]; *Juice* [1992]; *Menace II Society* [1993]), class remained an implicit, not isolated aspect in the characters’ romantic pursuits, which were made further problematic due to issues of racism, violence, education, and urban politics. Conversely, Clinton-era films that featured teens in extreme class positions—such as the wealthy youth in *Clueless* (1995), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), and *Traffic* (2000), or the working class in *Mi Vida Loca* (1994), *Kids* (1995), and *Girlfight* (2000)—tended to neutralize class difference by keeping the characters within the same caste. And teen films of the George W. Bush era that could have been
prime sites to address class issues among youth still tended to elide economic tensions by emphasizing other conflicts, problems in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), *What a Girl Wants* (2003), and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005); crime in *Thirteen* (2003), *Brick* (2005), and *Alpha Dog* (2007); or sports success in *Coach Carter* (2005), *Stick It* (2006), and *The Longshots* (2008). Economic influences on youth romance have been even more remarkably divested from teen films in recent years, especially considering the serious recession that has gripped the country since before the election of President Obama in 2008. Most recent youth films have sidestepped class issues almost entirely: *Sex Drive* (2008) employs a road trip format focusing on teens’ repressed sexuality rather than their evident tensions with affluence; *Youth in Revolt* (2009) is similarly preoccupied with sexual (and religious) repression as a means of modulating the otherwise obvious impact of working-class conditions on young love; *17 Again* (2009) marginalizes the political and financial implications of its familiar age-changing plot; and *Easy A* (2010) replaces class ascension for its protagonist with popularity for her assumed promiscuity.

Youth films of the 1980s essentially told teens that class was not a barrier to young love; youth films since then have proceeded with that message learned, seeking out other issues to confront. The final irony of the Reagan-era class-clash teen romances has been that the 1980s films’ excessive emphasis on class made the topic both less relevant to 1990s youth and more marginalized by the 2000s adults who now make teen films.

**Notes**

1. For a more complete analysis of these trends in teen cinema, see Shary.
2. Wartenberg provides a compelling analysis of class as an issue in post-Reagan adult romances, specifically *Pretty Woman* and *White Palace* (both 1990), which is well worth consulting in relation to this study. His work challenges some of the claims made by Wexman, although he is more positively influenced by Cavell. Alas, like most studies of popular American cinema, these books ignore youth films, which feature the teenage population that ostensibly grows into the adult characters they do examine.
3. Howard Deutch directed both films, with Hughes as writer-producer.
4. For an interesting examination of male sexuality in the youth films of John Hughes, see Whatley.
5. According to Bernstein, “test audiences balked at [the original] outcome. They wanted to see the poor girl get the rich boy of her dreams. They didn’t care about the dignity of the oppressed” (78). But Floyd claims: “For technical and personal reasons—no time to shoot the
reaction shots of the ‘richie’ onlookers, and Molly Ringwald’s illness in the last few days of
shooting—the present ending was substituted” (243).

6. Grant discusses a number of these films, cogently making the case that wealth—or more
specifically, losing wealth—became a terrifying threat in many movies of the late 1980s and
early 1990s. He observes that films such as Fatal Attraction (1987), Pacific Heights (1990), and
The Temp (1993) “necessarily question (by expressing an unease about) capitalist ideology”
(164), and concludes that such yuppie horror films reveal “the inevitable anxiety generated by
the biggest monster of all, late capitalism” (168).

Films Cited


Works Cited

Bartlett, Donald L., and James B. Steele. America: What Went Wrong?
   Part III, 3.
Clark, Timothy B., and Richard Corrigan. “Ronald Reagan’s Economy.” 
Grant, Barry Keith. “Rich and Strange: The Yuppie Horror Film.” 
   Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film. Eds. Barry Keith Grant 
Lewis, Jon. The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture. 
Quart, Leonard, and Albert Auster. American Film and Society Since 
Sahu, Anandi, and Ronald Tracy. “Introduction.” The Economic Legacy of 
   the Reagan Years: Euphoria or Chaos? Eds. A. Sahu and R. Tracy. 
Shary, Timothy. Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary 


**Timothy Shary** is an associate professor of Film and Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He has published three books on youth in cinema and is currently researching the depictions of elderly characters in movies. In addition to PCA, he has presented his work at FWPCA and SPCA.