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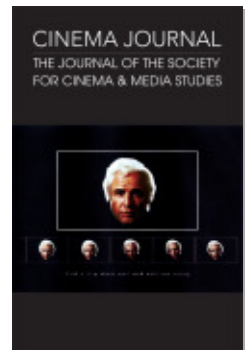
## **Postfeminist Cliques? Class, Postfeminism, and the Molly Ringwald-John Hughes Films**

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# Postfeminist Cliques? Class, Postfeminism, and the Molly Ringwald–John Hughes Films

by ANTHONY C. BLEACH

**Abstract:** In order to reconsider the ways in which social class is articulated in 1980s postfeminist culture, this article investigates three iconic films starring Molly Ringwald: *Sixteen Candles* (John Hughes, 1984), *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985), and *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986).

The contemporary American cultural landscape is notably awash with references to the mid-1980s. Molly Ringwald, beloved star of *Sixteen Candles* (John Hughes, 1984), features prominently in a supporting role in ABC Family’s *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008–). Jon Cryer, who played opposite Ringwald in *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986), was nominated for a Primetime Emmy for his role in *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003–), while James Spader, Ringwald and Cryer’s costar in the same film, recently won twice for his own work on *Boston Legal* (ABC, 2004–2008). *The Breakfast Club*’s (John Hughes, 1985) poster was lovingly appropriated in an early advertising campaign for the documentary *American Teen* (Nanette Burstein, 2008). And familiar scenarios from Hughes’s film—including the lunchmeat-on-the-statue bit, the makeover-of-the-basket-case scene, and the “everybody dance!” sequence—were used in movie and television spots and on an interactive microsite by retailer J.C. Penney, for their 2009 back-to-school marketing campaign called, unimaginatively, “The J.C. Penney Club.”

Why the cultural refocus on these films and icons of 1980s adolescence? Is this just typical nostalgia? Or, as Emilio Estevez explains in *St. Elmo’s Fire* (Joel Schumacher, 1985), is it a matter of obsession, thank you very much? Jaime Clarke, editor of the 2007 collection *Don’t You Forget About Me: Contemporary Writers on the Films of John Hughes*, would probably say the latter: as he admits, “the anthology you’re holding in your hands was put together in a bid at recapturing these salad days.”<sup>1</sup> And, despite its illogical move of “evoking movies nobody under the age of thirty knows about, let alone cares about,” marketing guru Rick Mathieson claims that

1 Jaime Clarke, introduction to *Don’t You Forget About Me: Contemporary Writers on the Films of John Hughes*, ed. Jaime Clarke (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2007), 2.

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J.C. Penney's nostalgia runs much deeper than it initially seemed. As he explains, the retailer had its sights (and Web sites) set on the *parents* of the back-to-school crowd: "Kids won't get the references, and *The Breakfast Club's* focus on cliques that come together seems like stating the obvious in today's multi-culty teen world. But hey, we grownups will have fun."<sup>2</sup> Despite downplaying this nostalgia for a cultural moment as nothing more than "fun," Mathieson is on to something with his claim that "cliques that come together seems like stating the obvious."

The implication is that, in the 1980s, things were much different than they are today. Mathieson points out that the (teenage) world wasn't always this "multi-culty," that the coming together of black and white, boy and girl, rich kid and poor kid, princess and loner, jock and stoner, wasn't always "obvious." Mathieson, I think, points out what precisely made *The Breakfast Club* different—and what, in turn, makes it perhaps evoke a different set of nostalgic memories—from the hundreds of teen films and artifacts of teen culture that emerged during the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, this film addressed head-on the issue of high school cliques, and was explicit that these cliques were defined partly on the basis of socioeconomic status. And the remarkable thing is that *The Breakfast Club* wasn't quite alone in this. As I will explore below, like *The Breakfast Club*, two other John Hughes–helmed films that starred Molly Ringwald in the 1980s—*Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink* (written by Hughes, directed by his protégé Howard Deutch)—are *all* exceptional in their treatment of social class.

**Class Matters: The Ringwald-Hughes Films and Social Class.** These three films are notable not simply because they are from the 1980s—a decade whose very mention, one critic remarks, "tends to provoke the rolling up of sleeves and spitting on hands as a precursor to escorting those contentious years outside and pounding the living shit out of them"—or because they are all teen films, a genre often dismissed as appealing to "dumb, horny, crater-faced metal-mouthed, 14-year-old boys . . . lurking around the multiplex or the video store or the rec room."<sup>4</sup> Rather, these are exceptional films because it is the figure of a young woman—Ringwald's character in all three—who struggles within or against the class constraints erected within their narratives. In the first book-length examination of 1980s teen films, Jonathan Bernstein claims that "the function of girls in teen movies (except for those helmed by John Hughes) was to display good-natured tolerance in the face of stalking, voyeurism, and fumbled attempts at seduction."<sup>5</sup> He further argues that "many of the eighties teen flicks expressed a yearning for a pluralistic schoolyard where wealth was no longer an impediment to the

2 Rick Mathieson, "The Text-Fast Club: JC Penney's Back-to-School Campaign Reaches for Mobile Teens," *Branding Unbound*, July 7, 2008, <http://maverix.typepad.com/brandingunbound/2008/07/the-texting-clu.html> (accessed July 15, 2008).

3 Timothy Shary astutely credits *The Breakfast Club* as the "apex" of the teen movie subgenre of the school film. Its evergreen status is incredible: "There has been little effort by filmmakers to experiment with or change the types of characters featured in school films, even as the conditions of the school environments and the context of youth images have inevitably continued to evolve." See Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 30.

4 Jonathan Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 2.

5 *Ibid.*, 173–174.

interaction of previously segregated social strata.” Bernstein singles out John Hughes as the one director whose teenage characters are always “railing against cliques and caste systems.”<sup>6</sup> Hughes’s films are different, according to Bernstein, because of their treatment of gender and class.

Like Bernstein, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner suggest that Hughes’s teen films have “the makings of a socialist discourse,” as they “make class differences the basis of their romantic plots.”<sup>7</sup> What his films actually accomplish with this “subliminal” discourse seems to be equivocal, though. On one hand, Ryan and Kellner claim that his films appear to “mobilize persistent populist anger against unjustifiable differentials in the distribution of wealth” by using romance narratives that show teenagers from different classes superseding class differences in order to join together. On the other hand, these same films can’t seem to think outside of these class differences: “none . . . overtly advocates a leveling” of them. What Hughes seems to be saying in his films is that “the metaphor of romance . . . promotes the persistence of class differences by suggesting that they ultimately make no difference.” Regardless, his films do express “a desire for such leveling” of class differences, although on a “personal/emotional” level rather than on a “structural/rational” one.<sup>8</sup>

Jon Lewis also discusses the ways Hughes’s teen films emphasize the importance of individual solutions to class differences: “Hughes’s little dramas of class warfare end . . . with the triumph of individuality.”<sup>9</sup> Lewis claims, importantly, that it is the *female* protagonist whose place in the narrative allows her to upset the social order of things. He argues that the protagonist’s “populism, . . . [her] democratic benevolence, coordinates a victory of romance over cynicism.”<sup>10</sup> Further, he claims that Hughes’s teen films insist “on the clairvoyance and persistence of the feminine.”<sup>11</sup> These critics suggest that one reason why Ringwald and these films are endlessly remembered today might be because a young woman is the one figure across the films who attempts to navigate the class differences of her social milieu.<sup>12</sup>

**Molly Ringwald: Postfeminist Heroine?** I would like to read Molly Ringwald’s characters, first of all, as precursors to the heroines of what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra call enduring “postfeminist franchises” of the last decade. Films such as *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall, 2001), *What a Girl Wants* (Dennie Gordon, 2003), and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) are, like Ringwald’s, teen films featuring young women

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 120.

8 Ibid.

9 Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 138.

10 Ibid., 139.

11 Ibid., 141.

12 Of course, another reason might be Ringwald’s ubiquity. She was everywhere on the cultural radar in the 1980s: high-profile cover stories in *Time* and *Life*; articles and features in publications ranging from *People* to *Rolling Stone* to *Seventeen*; fashion spreads in *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Interview*; friendships and romances with Hollywood’s mainstream (Warren Beatty) and indie scene (Dweezil Zappa); and the requisite legions of “Ringlet” fans, who imitated her “punk-flapper fashion sense” and “designer-junk shop couture.” See, among others, Richard Corliss, “Well, Hello Molly!” *Time*, May 26, 1986, 66–71.

protagonists and circulating “empowerment rhetoric” and “identity paradigms.”<sup>13</sup> As Mary Celeste Kearney reminds us, too, films in which young women struggle to find their identity often “incorporate contemporary feminist themes” such as “confidence, assertiveness, and self-respect apart from boys” in order to ultimately demonstrate these young women’s paths to empowerment.<sup>14</sup> As I will explore below, Ringwald’s characters’ empowerment comes as a result of their negotiations with class differences.

However, while critics such as Ann De Vaney read the Ringwald-Hughes coming-of-age films as representative of backlash sensibilities, at least partly because of their “neoconservative” treatment of social class, I want to avoid seeing them entirely within such terms.<sup>15</sup> For Susan Faludi, the 1980s were marked by concerted efforts on the part of social and economic conservatives to discredit or destroy the gains of feminist activism. In this linear formulation of the backlash, feminism can be seen as thriving one moment and dead the next, often because of its own actions. As Faludi reminds us, “this counterassault [on women’s rights] is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women’s position have actually led to their downfall.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, now that women have fantastic careers and are financially independent, popular newsmagazines chide them for missing out on husbands and marriage; now that women have reproductive choice, studio (and home) audiences laugh at their televisual stand-ins for wanting children; and now that women are acting sexually and independently, slasher films “reward” these qualities with bloody cinematic death. At every perceived feminist victory, Faludi says, backlash culture highlights the hollowness of that victory.

This definition of backlash ultimately assumes the defeat of feminism. While Faludi sees backlash as a *break* from feminism, in the way that the term “postfeminism” seemingly does (postfeminism, Tasker and Negra claim, assumes feminism’s supposed “pastness”<sup>17</sup>), I am not claiming in what follows that postfeminism always *follows* the death or the defeat of feminism. Rather, I see postfeminism as a redefinition of feminism, along the same lines as feminist scholar Angela McRobbie, who understands it as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of a linear model, then, this model is cyclical. Certain aspects of feminism, as McRobbie says, are “taken into account” in postfeminism.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, though, what unites McRobbie’s model with Faludi’s is that both are insistent upon

13 Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Tasker and Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 18.

14 Mary Celeste Kearney, “Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary US Cinema,” in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, ed. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 125.

15 See Ann De Vaney, “Pretty in Pink? John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy’s Girl in Homes and Schools,” in Gateward and Pomerance, *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice*, 204.

16 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), xviii.

17 Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 1.

18 Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 1.

19 Ibid.

the ways in which popular culture circulates postfeminism. McRobbie argues that “elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism.”<sup>20</sup> I will read the Ringwald-Hughes films, then, as circulating postfeminist, as opposed to backlash, discourses. To use Kearney’s words, they “incorporate . . . feminist themes” only to rearticulate and ultimately redefine these themes for their audiences.

One important way that postfeminist culture redefines feminism, Tasker and Negra explain, is through its class exclusions.<sup>21</sup> According to them, postfeminist culture accomplishes this by “centraliz[ing] . . . an affluent elite,” by “elevat[ing] consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents,” and by “confus[ing] self-interest with individuality.”<sup>22</sup> They explain further that postfeminist culture redefines feminism in the way that it sanctions “individualist, acquisitive, and transformative” values and behaviors, as well as in the way that it “participates in the ideological and economic normalization of new patterns of exclusion and demographic propriety in the United States.”<sup>23</sup> In a way, postfeminist culture can be said to address class differences in the way that Ryan and Kellner claim Hughes’s films address class differences. In both cases, social class matters in its presence (after all, it structures relationships between social cliques) as well as in its absence (its ability to be overcome by some only normalizes its existence).

In what follows, then, I will read Ringwald as a postfeminist heroine, not only because her characters’ individual empowerment strategies are linked to their negotiation of social class, but because these negotiations reveal the very same class “exclusions” inherent in postfeminist culture. Ultimately, I will argue that these films take feminism “into account” at the same time that Ringwald’s characters articulate the same “individualist, acquisitive, and transformative” values of postfeminism.

Before I investigate these films, though, I want to explore the state of class in the 1980s, since the postfeminist qualities mentioned above find their rhetorical echo in the economic policies and culture of the Reagan era. As Tasker and Negra ask of postfeminism’s class “exclusions,” “if liberation is linked to consumption and aspiration, what of the pressing economic and social issues that have to do with the long-term poverty that results from women’s lower pay, limited job opportunities, and child-care responsibilities?”<sup>24</sup> I would argue that the economic culture of the 1980s, like postfeminist culture in the 1990s, is largely unable to successfully answer this question.

20 Ibid.

21 Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 2. Similarly, Chris Holmlund claims that, to date, “postfeminist discourse in film studies has concentrated on [certain] big-budget late-1980s to early-1990s films,” and that “most commentators envision postfeminism as a white ‘chick’ backlash that denies class, avoids race, ignores (older) age, and ‘straight’-jackets sexuality.” See Chris Holmlund, “Postfeminism from A to G,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 116–121.

22 Ibid. Sarah Projansky usefully untangles the mediated discourse surrounding postfeminism in the 1980s and 1990s in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 66–89.

23 Tasker and Negra, “Introduction,” 7, 12.

24 Ibid., 12.

### Class and Economics in the 1980s: Individualism, Acquisition, Transformation.

The economic policies made popular in the 1980s, specifically those championed by Milton Friedman and enacted by supply-side supporters such as Representative Jack Kemp and Reaganomics boosters such as David Stockman, head of 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. Although he distanced himself from the later proponents of supply-side economics working in Washington, DC, Milton Friedman's exhortations of free-market capitalism in the late 1970s were most influential on the rhetoric emanating from academia, Wall Street, and Capitol Hill. According to historian John Ehrman, Friedman, like many conservatives, believed that because free markets "gave 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."<sup>25</sup> For the supply-side economists—such as Jude Wanniski, whose book *The Way the World Works* acted as a sort of manifesto for the new movement—boosting the free market meant cutting taxes, reducing government spending, balancing the federal budget, and eliminating government regulations.<sup>26</sup> The efforts of the individual were central. As Wanniski himself described it in 1975, "incentives and motivations of the individual producer and consumer and merchant are . . . the keystone of economic policy."<sup>27</sup> Importantly, too, as Reagan's economics policy advisor Martin Anderson recommended in 1979, supply-side economics meant "new inventions, new products, greater productivity, more jobs, and a rapidly rising standard of living," which in turn would mean "more goods and services for all of us."<sup>28</sup> According to the supply-side logic, everyone benefits financially from the efforts of the individual.

The individualistic zeal of supply-siders radiates from the "lessons of Reaganomics" drafted by the conservative Heritage Foundation in 1987, and summarized by historian Gil Troy: "Growth is good, the entrepreneur is a 'hero,' 'fair government' is limited government because individuals 'almost always can solve problems better than government can,' 'competition . . . breeds creativity,' and all four together 'create a dynamic economy.'"<sup>29</sup> According to this document, Reaganomics is much more than policy. It is "also a theory of how the world works and a theory of what man can do to change the world."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the hoped-for effects of Reaganomics were nothing less than "ideological, social, and technological salvation" for Americans.<sup>31</sup>

25 John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 35. See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

26 See Jude Wanniski, *The Way the World Works* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

27 Quoted in Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 36.

28 Quoted in Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 67.

29 Quoted in Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 63.

30 *Ibid.*, 63.

31 Troy, *Morning in America*, 67.

Of course, salvation—especially in its religious register—was seemingly the point for some supply-siders. Economic growth—brought about by the free market, by the efforts of individuals—could inject a sense of morality into the economic sphere and transform the social sphere. Politicians and academics alike repeatedly claimed that America could become a moral nation if the market was left alone. In his influential screed, for example, Wanniski warned, according to Ehrman, that “excessive taxation and regulation . . . drove women to prostitution, fed all manner of criminal enterprises, and even was responsible for the outbreak of World War II.”<sup>32</sup> Charles Murray, author of 1984’s *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*, claimed that poverty is actually born of social welfare, and that “steps to relieve misery can create misery.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, George Gilder’s *Wealth and Poverty*, a book well liked by Reagan himself and apparently handed out to members of his staff, blamed the poor themselves for their own economic condition and their lack of values.<sup>34</sup>

It is easy to see this ideology in a 1986 report from the Reagan administration, which claimed that social-welfare policies “frayed the fabric of American family life, bringing increased crime, illegitimate birth, drug use, teenage pregnancy, divorce, sexually transmitted disease and poverty.”<sup>35</sup> And of course, the only viable solution to this social rot was to let the market flourish. Representative Kemp (cosponsor of the original Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, one of the largest tax cuts in US history and an important victory for supply-side economists) wrote in 1979 that the growth resulting from supply-side economics would allow social problems “to take care of themselves,” instead of via the pesky influence of social-welfare economic policies.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, as Troy claims, the great promise of supply-side economics would be that “the social fabric could be restored if well-meaning government policies would no longer misguidedly perpetuate racism and poverty while breeding irresponsibility and crime.”<sup>37</sup>

While Reaganomics seemed a transformative panacea to the economy, it always emphasized the role of the individual, and as such, could only go so far to ameliorate the existing social inequalities in America. While I don’t want to overstate Stockman’s infamous quotation about wanting to enact “a frontal assault on the American welfare state,”<sup>38</sup> the fact remains that the deficits created because of Reagan-era economic policies necessitated “devastating cutbacks in Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, housing assistance, special nutritional programs for infants and pregnant mothers, and other programs . . . seen as misguided attempts to aid the

32 Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 36.

33 Quoted in Troy, *Morning in America*, 89. See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

34 George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

35 Quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1989), 186.

36 Quoted in Collins, *Transforming America*, 60–61. See Jack Kemp, *An American Renaissance: A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

37 Troy, *Morning in America*, 67.

38 Quoted in Collins, *Transforming America*, 74. See David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics: How the Reagan Revolution Failed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).



poor.”<sup>39</sup> What’s more, the lack of concentrated and committed economic solutions to the AIDS and homelessness epidemics of the 1980s, the fracturing of the family, and the country’s inability to adapt quickly in the face of an increasingly globalized economy, all point to the unfortunate triumph of “the individualistic elements of the American Creed rather than its egalitarian and communitarian ones” in the 1980s.<sup>40</sup>

Another important corollary to the individualist and transformative rhetoric that accompanied the economic policies of the 1980s, and one that finds a mirror in what Tasker and Negra identify as a quality of postfeminist culture, is the 1980s focus on and obsession with acquisitiveness. Cultural historian Debora Silverman notes that the Reagan era’s “cultural style” meshed well with its socioeconomic policies. This was a “style aggressively dedicated to the cult of visible wealth and distinction, and to the illusion that they were well earned. . . . [A] style of unabashed opulence, whose mixture of hedonism, spitefulness, and social repudiation was captured in the slogan ‘Living well is the best revenge.’”<sup>41</sup> If social-welfare policies were at the root of America’s woes, then surely basking in the glow of the increased consumption opportunities afforded by the free market would help everyone. Two early televised appearances by President Reagan seem to capture this culture of luxury. The first appearance, his inaugural parade, was marked by a \$16 million price tag, an hour-long car route, private planes, and a fleet of limousines; Gil Troy claims it “revealed a characteristically American approach to wealth, not as something to be resented because aristocrats monopolized it, but as something accessible to be enjoyed, directly or indirectly, and worshiped.”<sup>42</sup> In the second appearance, Reagan’s first televised address on the economy, he promised Americans that their “national wealth” would “increase . . . so all [would] have more”; wealth would not merely be redistributed.<sup>43</sup> This fantasy of unfettered yet utterly accessible consumption suffused the decade.

Troy acknowledges that the 1980s were certainly not different in their consumerist slant; what was different was that the decade was marked by an “almost reckless, autonomous individualism.” He claims that “consumerism became all-consuming” and offers the following analogy: “Money in the 1980s, like sex in the 1960s, became a legitimate conversation topic and the great barometer, with people trying to figure out who was getting more than expected, who less; who was winning, and who was losing.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, one of the most enduring stereotypes of the decade was the yuppie, who lived in a state of “Transcendental Acquisition,” as a 1984 issue of *Newsweek* put it,<sup>45</sup> who “built an identity on consuming rather than being, on things rather than relationships, on an aesthetic life rather than ascetic living.”<sup>46</sup> It might have been very

39 Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 186.

40 Collins, *Transforming America*, 117.

41 Debora Silverman, *Selling Culture: Bloomingdale’s, Diana Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan’s America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 11.

42 Troy, *Morning in America*, 50–51.

43 Quoted in Collins, *Transforming America*, 69.

44 Troy, *Morning in America*, 118–119.

45 Quoted in Collins, *Transforming America*, 163.

46 Troy, *Morning in America*, 122.

easy to giggle at the yuppie stereotype of the BMW-driving, brie-eating, Burberry-Gucci-Cartier-Hermès-wearing crew lunching at trendy restaurants and vacationing in the Hamptons, to laugh at the excesses of those featured on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (syndicated, 1984–1995), and to intellectualize the stereotype’s penchant for brands and luxury goods, but Barbara Ehrenreich, among others, reminds us that “America was on a consumer binge” in the 1980s.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there is some truth to the refrigerator-magnet notion that America was “Born to Shop” in the 1980s, whether one investigates the economics of the rise in home ownership, the increase in consumption of luxury goods, the rise in credit card spending and debt, or the proliferation of malls and Walmarts across the American landscape.<sup>48</sup>

**Advertising Class.** The individualist and transformative economic policies of Reagan’s presidency, as well as the culture of wealth and acquisition encouraged by these policies, coalesced in the 1980s in a popular culture that touted the importance of the consuming, self-transforming individual. Feminist critic Susan Douglas’s discussion of advertising directed at female audiences in the 1980s illuminates how “individualist, acquisitive, and transformative” postfeminist culture takes feminism into account. In *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Douglas devotes a chapter to “the appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric” by corporations shilling products to women. She claims that, in the 1980s, “women’s liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires.”<sup>49</sup> For example, a Charles of the Ritz advertisement features a model with the copy: “I’m not the girl I used to be. Now I want to surround myself with beautiful things. And I want to look beautiful too. I’ve discovered that it’s easier to face the world when I like what I see in the mirror.” In Douglas’s view, this ad encapsulates “women’s recent history”: this model is not the same woman she used to be (and not the same woman as her audience’s mothers or grandmothers), simply because she is an active agent (she *wants*), who has her own desires (for “beautiful things” or to “look beautiful”).<sup>50</sup> This ad takes feminism into account with its language of liberation, agency, and desire. But it also redefines that language in promoting transformation solely as a result of individualism and a desire for consumer goods. The “I” in the ad, after all, is solipsistic. The only person speaking is speaking about herself and her own desires, desires which are connected only to her. “The world” comes into the thoughts of the speaker as something to be faced, not something that is facing her. And the “I” is an acquisitive “I”: it *wants*.

Douglas observes two overarching, yet connected, themes in these advertisements that demonstrate the ways in which “women’s liberation became equated with women’s ability to do whatever they wanted for themselves, whenever they wanted,

47 Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 224.

48 See Collins, *Transforming America*, 157–163; Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 223–231; Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 90–127; and Troy, *Morning in America*, 115–146, 204–234. See also Nicholas Mills, ed., *Culture in an Age of Money: The Legacy of the 1980s in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990).

49 Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 246.

50 *Ibid.*, 245.

no matter what the expense.”<sup>51</sup> One theme emphasizes transformative liberation via the pursuit of luxury, while another exhorts women to think about luxury as a way of marking oneself as different or separate from others. In one ad, Douglas notes that a woman “covered from forehead to rib cage” with a beauty compound is “passive, inactive, supine,” but, importantly, she’s also “in complete control . . . dependent on no one, [her] time is [her] own.” In a tidy explanation of the contradiction inherent in having someone be inactive yet in control, Douglas argues that this woman’s liberation, according to the logic of the ad, comes from the “symbols of wealth” surrounding her: “art objects, unusual breeds of dogs, the omnipresent glass of white wine.” Liberation—and her transformation into something different—is thus equated with luxury. Yet liberation, Douglas notes, also comes from this woman’s “insulation from the masses.”<sup>52</sup>

This, I think, is crucial. Whether advertisements of the 1980s rely on an elitist approach as a way of addressing a cultured, savvy woman, or co-opt the fitness movement’s focus on health and exercise (and in turn emphasize sexiness and sexuality) to hawk their wares, popular culture uses the language of female empowerment not just to promote personal transformation, but to tell its female audience that “separating oneself from the less enlightened, less privileged herd” is an essential move.<sup>53</sup> As Douglas says, “in all these ads, sisterhood was out, competitive individualism was in.”<sup>54</sup>

Here we can see the socioeconomic policies of the Reagan era colliding—and colliding—with the postfeminist popular culture of the decade. Reaganomics exalted the individual in the free market and told America that transformation could be achieved by ignoring (or destroying the policies that helped) the many and simultaneously acquiring the goods and services that helped you. Postfeminist popular culture told—and continues to tell—its audiences that consumption could transform or liberate you, and that a key component of your transformation was your ascendancy—and only *your* ascendancy—above the rest of the world. As Douglas claims, these ads repeatedly told you “to aspire to the privileged, idle, self-indulgent world of the rich,” a class that knew the importance of being privileged, idle, and self-indulgent.<sup>55</sup> What emerged was an echo chamber, where the socioeconomic policies voiced by the Reagan administration echoed back in the values verbalized by the popular culture.

I would argue that some of the key voices in this echo chamber belonged to the postfeminist heroines that Molly Ringwald portrayed in the films she made with John Hughes. As I will show, her characters are constructed around the symbols of feminism such as strength, independence, desires (whether sexual or consumerist), and participation in the marketplace (as a consumer or a worker). What’s more, her characters’ individualized acquisitiveness—like that of the women in the ads Susan Douglas examines—is a transformative one.

51 Ibid., 246.

52 Ibid., 251.

53 Ibid., 246.

54 Ibid., 257.

55 Ibid., 256.

Her transformations are empowering in different ways; however, they all demonstrate the ways in which feminism is “taken into account,” as Douglas puts it. In *Sixteen Candles*, Ringwald’s transformation into the girlfriend of someone from the upper class comes as a result not necessarily of her actions, but at least partly because of her active desire for consumer goods. In *The Breakfast Club*, she is an agent of transformation, helping another young woman, albeit one from outside of her class, get noticed by another student by giving her the trappings of traditional femininity. And in *Pretty in Pink*, her character’s romance with someone from the upper class comes as a result of her own actions, as she transforms herself using a traditionally feminine object (the film’s famous pink dress). Her empowering transformations, I argue, happen at the cost of other women, as totalizing effects of consumer products on women, or in spite of an alternative empowerment that working offers.

### **“I’m Sixteen: Everything Should Be Platinum!” Acquiring *Sixteen Candles*.**

In *Sixteen Candles*, Ringwald plays Sam Baker, who wakes up on her sixteenth birthday hoping that her parents remember that it is her birthday. Because her older sister Ginny’s wedding looms the next day, Sam is left dangling. All day, she pines after Jake Ryan—who’s dating the school “queen” Caroline—while fending off the amorous advances of the appropriately named Geek at a school dance and enduring two pairs of grandparents and one patently stereotyped Asian exchange student at home. That night, wackiness and mawkishness at the school dance ensue for Sam. Geek, meanwhile, has made a deal with Jake: Geek offers information about Sam, while Jake loans him Caroline and his car. The next day, Jake meets Sam outside the church after the wedding and, later that night, the two share a birthday cake and a kiss.

As the character whose forgotten birthday gives the film its title, Sam is our clear focal point. What’s more, she can be read as a “liberated” young woman: she’s able to express tentative sexual desire for Jake when she and her friend Randy pass notes in class, she’s quick witted when verbally sparring with Geek, she’s independent and freely speaks her mind to her parents and grandparents; she’s definitely the person who’s given the best lines in the film.<sup>56</sup> However, Sam’s feminist qualities don’t quite jibe with the astonishing lengths to which the film goes to destroy Caroline. I would argue that, although they never actually interact in the film, except for one brief moment at the school dance, the narrative sets Caroline up as Sam’s rival, the one impediment to her cross-class romance in the film.

To understand how the film articulates its postfeminism, we must first examine how it sets up its class milieu. The Baker house, from the film’s opening sequence, is situated among many other houses just like it along a tree-lined suburban street. This uniformity among houses is stressed by the gag of the paper-delivery truck tossing papers across both sides of the street, seemingly oblivious to where they’ll land. Sam lives with her two parents, Ginny, and two younger siblings. With the exception of sequences in her bedroom, where she’s alone, or in Ginny’s bedroom, where the two talk about

56 According to a 1985 article on Ringwald, Hughes wrote the film with an eight-by-ten-inch photo of her taped above his word processor “for inspiration.” He claims, “I wrote it with her in mind.” See Hillary Johnson, “Golly Miss Molly,” *Rolling Stone*, March 28, 1985, 103.

the wedding, the sections of the film set in the common areas of the Baker house are frantic and crowded. From what we can tell, the family drives a station wagon, and the children take the bus to school. Mr. Baker carpools and works a white-collar office job while Mrs. Baker seems to stay at home, orchestrating her kids' and her husband's movements during the day. Although all the children seem to have their own bedrooms (Sam's is a converted attic space), and Sam has her own telephone line, there's no evidence of the family engaging in conspicuous consumption of material goods; two exceptions are the television in the kitchen and the younger brother's Walkman. In other words, this is a solidly middle-class suburban family.

This *mise-en-scène* contrasts with Jake Ryan's world. We only see his house on its own, never in the context of any other houses around it. While the Baker house has a small front yard, small enough for the paper boy to toss his wares onto, the Ryan front yard is large enough to accommodate a cul-de-sac for trees to grow on and cars to park on. Jake is an only child, and although we're not told what his parents do for a living, they're undoubtedly white-collar professionals, one of whom dabbles on Wall Street (the NYSE license plate gives it away). This class position is further transmitted through the markers of consumption that are all around their house: a stereo with turntable and tape player; a kitchen with food processors and huge refrigerator; an exercise bike and set of weights; a well-stocked wine cellar; a piano; and central air conditioning. Of course, there's also the matter of their three-car garage with a Rolls-Royce and car phone (in case we don't get it, Geek exclaims to Jake that the grille alone costs "five grand"); Jake's red Porsche; and the furs, pearls, and jewels that Caroline and her drunk friends wear around the house.

The film's approach to the rich and their Reagan-era culture of consumption is epitomized in what happens to the Ryans' house during and after a party Jake throws: toilet paper adorns the trees; a lawn jockey wears red panties; the tape player spits out its contents while a pizza spins on the turntable; the weights crash through two floors, destroying the contents of the wine cellar; the vents spew something soapy; Caroline's friends snap a long string of pearls when they totter down the stairs; and Geek plows the Rolls through a set of trash cans. Most telling, perhaps, of the film's attack on the wealthy, a shot of the party's aftermath includes a Visa card partly submerged in a can of bean dip; even the means by which the goods are bought gets destroyed (Figure 1).

But working alongside this gleeful celebration of the destruction of upper-class privilege is a similar sense that being a member of this class is something to strive for. Sam, who, perhaps importantly, is never present at the anarchic party at Jake's house, could be read as wanting to aspire to Jake's class. We find a telling articulation of this in the short conversation about her birthday she has with her girlfriend Randy early in the film. Sam tells Randy she wishes she could have the sweet sixteen party of her dreams, which is spoken about partly in terms of acquiring, whether people or consumer goods: she wants "tons of people," a band, a cute guy, and a black Trans Am. Randy tells Sam to remind her parents that they forgot her birthday; as she claims, the "massive guilt" could be "highly profitable." It's important that Randy speaks in a financial register: not only would having a big birthday party be good for Sam's psyche, it would also be good for her class position. Later on, this financial element of her



Figure 1. The destruction of the trappings of the wealthy: the aftermath of the party in John Hughes's *Sixteen Candles* (Universal, 1984).

birthday surfaces again, when Sam tells Geek that everything should be “platinum” at sixteen. So at the same time that the film enjoys messing with class—whether in the destruction of the signifiers of upper-class wealth, or in the way the narrative resolves itself into a cross-class romance between Sam and Jake—it also paints advancement to the upper class, through acquiring consumer goods or through the cross-class romance, as an important goal.

In this film, Sam’s negotiation of class marks her as a postfeminist heroine, in that her ability to be Jake’s girlfriend comes partly as a result of Caroline’s utter destruction. Of course, one reason for Caroline’s emotional and physical ruin might be that she is unappreciative of (or unreflective about) her class position. During the school dance, we find out that Jake has gotten upset at her because at parties in the past, she’s had a hand in wrecking his parents’ house. And when she’s dancing with Jake, she tells him, “God, I love it when your parents are out of town. I fantasize that I’m your wife and we’re like the richest and most popular adults in town.” When he’s not as receptive to this fantasy, she reminds him that she is, in a sense, a commodity desired by the other men at their school. These instances paint a portrait of someone who doesn’t appreciate the goods and the status that wealth can provide.

But this critique of blind upper-class privilege doesn’t quite explain the length to which the film goes to ensure that Caroline is out of Sam’s way at the end. At the party, Caroline gets smashingly drunk and manages to get her hair caught in a door; her friends take great drunken pleasure in chopping off the back of it to free her. In fact, this destruction of her personal appearance mirrors the widespread destruction of Jake’s house. As if to push this second parallel further, the film has Jake trade Caroline and the Rolls-Royce for Sam’s panties, which Geek, unbelievably, had managed to coerce from her. Caroline is also carried to the garage, dumped into the Rolls, and driven off and made to pose for a compromising photo by Geek for the benefit of his awkward friends. What happens to her in the narrative (whether her sloppy drunkenness, her scalping, or the potential for sexual coercion) seems to be both a projection of

Sam's desire to acquire Jake and become his girlfriend and a project of the film's desire to somehow harm the upper class.<sup>57</sup>

However, there might be another reading of Sam's transformation. For, by the end of the film, class differences have been (temporarily, at least) overcome (even if only on the level of the individual relationship) as Sam and Jake become a couple at the end. But even if the resolution of the narrative seems to point to the film's desire to supersede class differences through romance, this resolution also leaves competition between women of different classes and hostility toward women of the upper class as cultural givens, absolutely necessary if a middle-class young woman is to acquire a new boyfriend (and, by extension, a new class status). In the penultimate scene of the film, Mr. Baker's smiling "okay" gesture at Sam and Jake validates Sam's individualism and her acquisition of status by finding a partner above her class, regardless of the cost to other women. Ironically, as Susan Douglas reminds us, upper-class women like Caroline, even in such a broken and disheveled state, continue to provide models for middle-class women to strive for at the same time that they must compete, often viciously, with them.

**"Why Are You Being So Nice to Me?" Transforming *The Breakfast Club*.** As in *Sixteen Candles*, in *The Breakfast Club* women from the upper class by and large bear the brunt of the film's ambivalent class hostility, as women from different classes are uncritically shown to be hostile toward one another. Like *Sixteen Candles*, this film also creates a narrative around one woman's acquisition of consumer goods and her concomitant transformation; unlike in the previous film, this woman is not Ringwald's character, though Ringwald's character is the agent of this transformation. In *The Breakfast Club*, five high school students spend Saturday detention in their library together: Allison, "a Basket Case"; Andy, "an Athlete"; John, "a Criminal"; Brian, "a Brain"; and Claire, "a Princess" (Ringwald). The plot of the film is really that simple: after nine hours of sharing soul-baring dialogue about sex, parents, school, and the future—not to mention dope smoking, spontaneous dancing, and evading and insulting the principal—the five go home. As in *Sixteen Candles*, social class pervades the film, as the five are divided into upper-class insiders (Claire) and middle- (Andy, Brian) or working-class outsiders (Allison, John).

*The Breakfast Club's* mise-en-scène clearly represents its protagonists' class positions, especially in such sequences as the opening, when the five students arrive at school. Claire seems to arrive first, driven to school in a stylish grey BMW by her Burberry-scarved father. In a typical Reagan-era moment of awe at the culture of luxury, the shot tilts up the hood of the car, emphasizing the BMW logo. Claire sits in the front seat next to him and is told that "[d]itching class to go shopping doesn't make you a defective." Brian arrives next, crammed in the front seat of a red family car with his mother and sister, both of whom want him to "figure out a way to study" during detention. Andy and his father pull up behind Brian's family in a truck; Andy sits in the front seat, too, as his father browbeats him, reminding him not to "blow [his] ride" to college on an athletic scholarship. John lopes across the drop-off area, almost getting

57 Or at least women who do not couple at or above their social class. For instance, at her wedding ceremony to an "oily variety Bohunk" (who is coded as being from a class lower than the Bakers), Ginny is reduced to a tangle of floppy limbs and embarrassing gestures.

hit by Allison's car. Unlike the other characters, though, Allison emerges from the back seat of the blue car, and her parent(s) remain unseen. When she makes a tentative step toward the front seat to say something to the driver, the car squeals off, leaving her alone on the asphalt. In the world of the film, riding shotgun is a sign of the upper or middle class. On the other hand, riding in the back seat (or not riding at all) are this film's signifiers of the working class.

As in *Sixteen Candles*, one project of the film is to engage in (upper) class bashing through a female character. And like Caroline in the earlier film, Claire is the focus of most of the film's vindictiveness. Working-class John seems, at first, the most hostile toward Claire's class position. Early on, when he gets up from his seat to insult Claire, he moves to her right, so that he's framed directly behind and slightly above her; he's filmed from below eye level here. This serves to overdetermine his antagonism toward her, as he threatens to "impregnate" her, attacks her seemingly virginal and "pristine" character, and tells her that she's destined to become fat. But in the key long sequence where Andy and Brian tell why they are serving detention, and where all five talk about their families and friends and respective roles in the school, it's Allison and John who relentlessly assail Claire; their attacks on her more or less bookend this scene. In the beginning moments, Allison taunts Claire with stories about her nymphomania, trips her up verbally, and ultimately makes her loudly admit her virginity to the group. Near the end, John laughs at her ability to apply lipstick with her cleavage, hollers at her own judgmental behavior toward his friends, and makes her cry by pestering her about her daddy-bought diamond earrings and her "poor, rich, drunk mother in the Caribbean." Read through the lens of class, this is the film's way of knocking at the barriers of class: another instance of upper-class privilege bashing.

Read through a gendered lens, though, these scenes are where the film offers Claire as a postfeminist heroine. Claire is sophisticated and powerful; much like Sam Baker, she's coded as a feminist character. Unlike Sam, though, she's an agent who ultimately motivates the utopian conclusion of the film, where the class positions of the students are undermined by the plot device of the cross-class romance. Claire is the one who sneaks out of the library to rendezvous and smooch with John, who's been forcibly removed to a storage room. She later gives him one of her diamond earrings as a way of expressing her rebellion.<sup>58</sup> She gives Allison new makeup, a new hairstyle, and new clothes, so that she becomes irresistible to the smitten Andy. And she's the one who reminds Brian that he's the smartest one, so he should carry out the detention punishment—writing an essay for the principal—which lets everyone else off the hook. Claire's postfeminist heroine is invested in leaving class positions intact at the same time that she struggles within their constraints; after all, as a member of the upper class, she can only stand to benefit from remaining in power.

The crucial postfeminist move here, I think, is Allison's makeover.<sup>59</sup> The relationship between Claire and Allison doesn't quite make narrative sense, considering their

58 I thank one of the anonymous *Cinema Journal* readers for pointing out this overdetermined class gesture.

59 Contemporary critics of the film—as well as Sheedy herself—saw Allison's transformation as the film's biggest narrative stumble. See, among others, Pauline Kael, "The Breakfast Club," *New Yorker*, April 8, 1985, 123–125; Janet Maslin, "John Hughes's Breakfast Club," *New York Times*, February 15, 1985; and Ally Sheedy, foreword to *Don't You Forget About Me*, xi.



earlier antagonism (Figure 2). As Allison asks Claire during the latter's application of mascara, "Why are you being so nice to me?" Of course, Allison and Claire's bonding over eyeliner is a feminist move; unlike the women in the ads Douglas analyzes, and certainly unlike Sam Baker and Caroline in *Sixteen Candles*, these two can be read as sharing in their empowerment via the application of beauty products. However, rather than tolerating or celebrating the differences between women of different classes, the film actualizes the promises made by the ads aimed at women in the 1980s, saying that anyone can become a member of the upper class as long as she acquires (and correctly uses, as we shall see in *Pretty in Pink*) the right stuff.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 2. Female friendship or competition? Allison (Ally Sheedy) stares suspiciously at Claire (Molly Ringwald) in John Hughes's *The Breakfast Club* (Universal, 1985).

It might even be constructive to read Allison herself as a postfeminist figure, since she is coded as an individual and acquisitive; what's more, her transformation is much more overt than anyone else's in the group.<sup>61</sup> For example, Allison is friendless and free spirited; she seems less tied down by the same social pressures that obsess the rest of the group (she even tells the group she's in detention because she has nothing better to do). What's more, she seems slightly more aware of the world outside of her high school existence than any other character in this film, when she talks, for instance, of running away to Israel or Afghanistan. She, too, is given the most politically aware line, when she talks of the "double-edged sword" of adolescent female sexuality: "If you say you haven't, you're a prude. If you say you have, you're a slut."

But Allison's individualism is coded as "crazy" in the world of the film; her acquisitiveness, run rampant, is kleptomania. And, as her makeover demonstrates, in the

60 Rachel Moseley argues that *The Breakfast Club* "carefully deconstructs its stereotypes, interrogates difference, and addresses questions of class and status." While I agree that the film allows "a space for difference to exist," the film does precisely what Moseley claims 1990s teen films do: it engages in the "transformation and reinstatement of acceptable norms of feminine appearance and behaviour." See Rachel Moseley, "Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender and Magic in Teen Film and Television," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 405–406.

61 Margy Rochlin called Sheedy a "brat-pack feminist" in 1986. See Margy Rochlin, "Brat-Pack Feminist," *Ms.*, May 1986, 15–16.

Reagan era, her differences are erased (and conveniently forgotten) by the workings of the upper class. In this instance, Claire's feminism is "taken into account," only to demonstrate its totalizing force: not just Allison but all of the other teenagers in this film march to the beat of her drum. And, in spite of the momentary class leveling, Claire is still popular and privileged come Monday morning.

**Working on the "Volcanic Ensemble" in *Pretty in Pink*.** *Pretty in Pink* continues with *The Breakfast Club's* use of the makeover motif to actualize a young woman's metaphoric entrance into another social class. And, as in *Sixteen Candles*, Ringwald's character is rewarded with a cross-class romance that comes at least partly as a result of her voiced economic desires. As in the two earlier films, too, we're given characters that are coded as feminist. What makes *Pretty in Pink* different from the previous Ringwald films is that here young women are members of the workforce, and this is explored as an empowering strategy. In its way, the film engages with feminism and rearticulates it, pushing the joining together of couples from opposite sides of the class divide.<sup>62</sup>

Andie Walsh (Ringwald) and her father live in a poor section of the city. While attending a private high school, and mooned over by friend Duckie, Andie moons over "richie" Blane and works at her friend Iona's record store. One day, Blane visits the store, and the two start dating. While dealing with a cross-class relationship, Duckie's unrequited love and jealousy, and Blane's friend Steff's cruelty, Andie also confronts and tries to motivate her father to get a job and get over his abandonment by his wife. Blane asks Andie to the prom, but because of Steff's pressure and his own self-doubt, he backs off and eventually stops calling her. Andie decides to go stag to the prom with a dress created from two others—one from her father, and one given to her by Iona, who has gone from punky to yuppie with a different boyfriend—where she meets Duckie. The two hug and walk into the prom together, where, at Duckie's urging, Blane and Andie declare their love and reconcile their relationship.

I want to begin my discussion of the film by looking at Andie's relationship with (and the character of) Iona, in that this film makes a strong case for the power of female bonding. To be sure, female hostility along class lines is present in *Pretty in Pink*, yet Andie's economic advancement across the class divide isn't as strongly impeded by the "richie" women in the film as Sam's is in *Sixteen Candles*. Having said that, though, Steff's girlfriend Benny is a constant nagging presence, seemingly everywhere that Andie doesn't want her to be. For example, Benny makes fun of Andie at school (she asks at one point if Andie gets her clothes at a "five and dime"), wonders aloud to her if her presence at a party is a drunken nightmare, and unknowingly scares her out of an expensive formalwear shop. The way in which Benny always appears to confront Andie would be laughable (a leftover ghost, perhaps, of the hostility between Ringwald's Sam and Caroline in *Sixteen Candles*) if their relationship weren't contrasted in the film with Andie's important relationship with Iona.

62 A non-Ringwald Hughes film worth mentioning in the context of postfeminism is *Some Kind of Wonderful* (written by Hughes and directed by Deutch, 1986), which regenders the story of *Pretty in Pink* and takes feminism "into account" with the characters of Amanda and Watts. See also John G. Avildsen's 1988 *For Keeps*, another postfeminist Ringwald film, though one not helmed by Hughes.

The film does two crucial things with Iona's character. First of all, she, like Andie, is marked by the symbols of feminism: she's a strong and sassy business owner, who speaks out against what she notices are personal and social injustices, and who changes her appearance—and pushes against the codes of acceptable femininity—in every sequence. What's more, she certainly provides a role model for Andie's eclectic “volcanic ensemble[s],” as Duckie describes Andie's outfits. Secondly, the relationship between the two women is a rare case of female bonding in these films that more commonly demand that individual women be kept in competition with or hostile toward one another across class lines. For example, Iona gives Andie comfort when Blane jilts her, offers advice on dealing with the lovelorn Duckie, and provides her 1960s prom dress, which becomes Andie's creation in the final sequences of the film. But despite the fact that feminism is taken “into account” with Iona, she, like Andie, is caught up in a narrative in which class “progress”—or at least the trappings of luxury—becomes an important goal.

This might be one explanation for why what happens to Iona is also what happens to Allison in *The Breakfast Club*: she's moved into a higher socioeconomic class with a simple makeover. To prepare for a date with square pet-shop owner Terry, she goes through a complete physical transformation, shedding her wigs and decade-specific outfits and makeup to wear a conservative blazer and blouse. She herself seems confused by this change; as she says, she has either become a “mom” or a “yuppie.” Her relationship with Terry makes certain sense, along class lines: Iona has made herself over to look and act more like the class of business owners of which she's a part. She's also made herself over to be with someone she won't have to support financially, a point I will explore below. However, her makeover broadcasts the message that, at heart, what women want—even strong women like Iona—is to conform to traditional modes of class and gender.

The disconnect between her words and her eventual actions, typified by her transformation along class lines, is what makes Iona in *Pretty in Pink* a postfeminist figure. Similarly, Andie's postfeminism is defined by her desire to overcome class barriers and her individual efforts at acquiring a wealthy partner figure, in that, like Sam in *Sixteen Candles*, she is rewarded for her individual efforts, scoring a wealthy partner. But the film adds an interesting element to its class message: by and large, the upper classes are made to seem simply unappreciative of their own wealth and what it can bring them.<sup>63</sup> It's hinted that, when Andie and Blane come together as a couple, she will present a *corrective* to this way of thinking and will appreciate the trappings of her newly inherited class status. This sentiment is made explicit when Andie says of Steff's house (before she attends a party there), “I bet the people that live there don't think it's half as pretty as I do.” Wealth and consumer goods for Andie haven't come so easily, the film's logic goes, so she should appreciate the wealth that dating someone from the upper classes would bring. In fact, she's set up here as morally better than the “richies” since she would be thankful for her new class position.<sup>64</sup>

63 This is also Caroline's mindset in *Sixteen Candles*.

64 The fabled original ending of the film had Andie and Duckie united in dignity at the prom. If this conclusion had remained (test audiences apparently didn't like its pessimism), it would have provided a logical ending to this theme of the moral righteousness of the poor.

Running alongside this wish-fulfillment thread, where the morally upright poor young woman is somehow more worthy of the trappings of the wealthy than the wealthy themselves, the film sets up an important alternative to the Cinderella fairy-tale ending the narrative ultimately achieves: the bonding potential of working women. The sensibilities of *Pretty in Pink* do make room to address the issue of women, work, and financial achievement. In fact, I would argue that this Ringwald film most typifies how postfeminism takes feminism “into account,” while also revealing postfeminism’s class biases. While the device of Andie’s and Iona’s cross-class romances muddles the issue of work in the film, the representations of women working in this film can be read as feminism “taken into account”: the film gestures toward the idea that women can be independent and self-sufficient. However, there are two ways in which even this feminist source of power is rearticulated by the narrative.

One way is through Iona’s conflicted feelings about work. Before she and Terry start their relationship, she complains about the “deadbeats” she’s dated. In fact, she even tells Andie she’s “ahead of the game” with Terry, because he’s both “employed” and “heterosexual.” This would seem to point out the importance she recognizes in working: it brings you financial stability and consumer goods; she even tells Andie that sooner or later, now that she’s with Terry, she’ll be “picking out [her] china patterns.” Earlier in the film, however, she moans about how, even though she’s really good at decorating, she feels like it’s going to “waste” because she’s stuck being the owner of a business. Andie replies that her artistic prowess isn’t a waste, since she’s “good at it.” Iona snaps back, “I’m good in bed. Should I be a whore?” This is a brief piece of dialogue, but an important one for understanding the film’s postfeminist take on work. Despite being a financially stable unmarried working woman, Iona is dissatisfied with the fact that she’s a business owner. What’s more, she’s also fed up with the disconnect she notices between her own artistic skills—whether these skills help her decorate her store, her apartment, or her own appearance—and the ways these skills are used in the economic sphere. Her complaints at dating “deadbeats” and her “whore” comment, when taken together, paint a picture of work as a postfeminist strategy not for independence, empowerment, self-satisfaction, or self-expression but for sheer financial gain. This attitude about working, I would argue, undercuts the important position Iona is given in the film as a role model for Andie and as a female business owner who is artistically inclined.

Like Iona, Andie also recognizes the importance of working. She is constantly pestering her father in the beginning of the film to get a full-time job, asking him if he’s “perfectly happy” with being employed only part-time. And she explodes at him later for not keeping his appointment with an employment agent. We could read Andie’s desire for her father to work as an indicator of her desire for him to snap out of his depression; when she confronts him about her mother’s abandonment, it appears that this is the reason why he’s been avoiding work: he’s wallowing in self-pity. It’s never clear whether Andie is the primary breadwinner in their family, but we come to understand that her father sleeps late and lounges during the day on his front lawn drinking beer. The narrative sets it up as positive that Andie knows the importance of working for self-esteem and financial stability (not to mention consumer goods, as she owns a secondhand car).

Unlike Iona, however, 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” (Figure 3).<sup>65</sup> This action could even be read as her way of disproving Iona’s claim that being good at something you don’t get financial reward for is ultimately a waste. In fact, her work is anything but a waste, since her dress gives her the confidence both to go to the prom and to recapture the attention of Blane. Working in Andie’s estimation is more satisfying—and potentially more empowering—than in Iona’s; the narrative, though, suggests that working is merely making time until your rich Prince Charming arrives to rescue you from your class position.



Figure 3. Working girl: Andie (Molly Ringwald) labors over her creation in Howard Deutch’s *Pretty in Pink* (Paramount, 1986).

This film claims that the surest path toward economic well-being and empowerment for a woman is only temporarily connected with work. This underlying theme is supported by one small, albeit important, detail in the film. When Andie is doing her homework (on the New Deal) on a primitive personal computer, the monitor reads, in part, “More than 8,500,000 men and women were employed in building.” However, this sentence (and Andie’s work) is erased and interrupted by some fancy computer tricks that Blane does on the school’s network: he talks to her electronically and then displays side-by-side electronic photos of the two of them. This seems to be the film’s

65 Anne De Vaney, drawing on Valerie Walkerdine’s conception of resistance, claims that “Hughes undermines this message of pluck and ingenuity and, as Walkerdine so aptly notes, appropriates it from a ‘lower’ class as only a superficial form of resistance. It is precisely this commercial strategy, this bait, that appeals to young female customers consuming Hughes’s films while planning a wardrobe.” See De Vaney, “*Pretty in Pink?*” 208–209. See also Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy’s Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

message: employment for women becomes null and void, erased by the workings of the upper classes, when these women have boyfriends from higher classes than their own. The film, then, tantalizes its young female viewers with the promise of a road to rich(i)es, but not solely through their own work.

**Conclusion.** In some ways, my goal in reinvestigating these Molly Ringwald films engages with the dual impulses Rick Mathieson hints at in his analysis of the J.C. Penney campaign above. I saw these films many times growing up and still consider them influential in shaping my feminism, in how I thought and continue to think about gender and class. So, on the one hand, my investigation is nostalgic. But, on the other hand, I'm also interested in using this nostalgic impulse to consider how our reception of popular culture of the past can inform our discussions of popular culture of the present, to suggest that recent postfeminist culture—in this case, certain girl-centered teen films of the 1980s—can inform our understandings and explorations of contemporary postfeminist culture.

Ringwald is an enduring figure: aside from her role in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, she made the cover of *Us* magazine in 2001 as the lead in a feature on “80’s Ladies,” has starred in Broadway and off-Broadway plays, and has had cameos in *Since You’ve Been Gone* (David Schwimmer, 1998, playing a character named Claire) and *Not Another Teen Movie* (Joel Gallen, 2001). What is more, the Ringwald-Hughes films continue to be influential. Contemporary directors such as Kevin Smith and Kevin Williamson have paid tribute to Hughes and *The Breakfast Club*, while all three of the films are rumored to have sequels in the works.<sup>66</sup> As such, it is not difficult to trace their currents of gender and class in recent postfeminist films such as *Thirteen* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003), *13 Going On 30* (Gary Winick, 2004), and *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007). As a set of popular texts, then, the Ringwald-Hughes films offer fertile ground for further feminist inquiry.

66 Famously, postfeminist heroine Courtney Love has claimed (according to Bernstein) that *The Breakfast Club* was “the defining moment of the ‘alternative’ generation.” I thank the anonymous *Cinema Journal* reader who pointed out Ringwald’s cameo appearances. See Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink*, 55.

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