**But what does it all mean?**

How to decode the John Hughes high school movies

* [The Guardian](http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian), Friday 26 September 2008



Growing pains ... The cast of The Breakfast Club. Photograph: Allstar

They showed us the American high school was a hotbed of class war and identity crisis; they allowed teenagers to be articulate and sensitive on screen; they introduced us to the Brat Pack ... but the John Hughes high-school movies weren't all bad. With the six teen films he released between 1984 and 1987, John Hughes stunned Hollywood by demonstrating that the film industry's most despised genre could spawn its own auteur. The titles are a roll-call of surging hormones and frustrated adolescence: Sixteen Candles, The Breakfast Club, Weird Science, Pretty in Pink, Ferris Bueller's Day Off and Some Kind of Wonderful. Hughes wrote all of them, but for two (Pink and Wonderful) handed over the director's reins to Howard Deutch.

1. The Breakfast Club
2. **Production year:** 1984
3. **Country:** USA
4. **Cert (UK):** 15
5. **Runtime:** 92 mins
6. **Directors:** John Hughes
7. **Cast:** Ally Sheedy, Anthony Michael Hall, Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson, Molly Ringwald, Paul Gleason
8. [More on this film](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/movie/76286/breakfast.club)

By the late 1980s, Hughes had lost interest in teens, moving back down the age range with Home Alone and Baby's Day Out. Nevertheless, his high school movies all remain classics of their kind, riven with codes, tics and motifs that distinguish them from lesser works. Here's a short guide:

**Check the hair**

High-school hunk Jake Ryan is gawking at classmate Samantha Baker in Sixteen Candles: "There's somethin' about her," he mumbles. Preppie rich kid Blane McDonagh is discussing hard-up student Andie Walsh in Pretty in Pink: "You really don't think she's got something?" he asks. Just what is it that Sam and Andie have? How come a pair of high-status alpha males fixate on a way-below-their-league Molly Ringwald? It's the hair. Ringwald was the first authentic red-headed Hollywood female star since the Technicolor era. It finessed that air of awkward vulnerability she specialised in, and ensured she stood out from the crowd without any brassy tactics. Any doubts over where Hughes stood on the subject of red hair should be demolished by taking a look at Some Kind of Wonderful: Hughes has switched the gender of his romantic lead and, yes, it was the scarlet-bonced Eric Stoltz who got the role.

**Pump up the volume**

Nothing sets out Hughes' intentions more explicitly than the quote that flashes up on the screen as The Breakfast Club begins: "... and these children that you spit on/ as they try to change their worlds are/ immune to your consultations./ They're quite aware of what they're going through." It's from David Bowie's Changes, and treating Bowie's cryptic utterances as if they're Shakespeare or Aristotle demonstrates the seriousness with which Hughes takes his teen characters. He made the largely British new-wave music of the 70s and 80s an essential component of his dramatic art. Pretty in Pink is named after the Psychedelic Furs song that became a hit when it was featured in the movie, and Hughes pretty much transformed the career of Simple Minds by making Don't You (Forget About Me) the film's main theme. Hughes also recognised the value of the still-novel MTV channel, where music promos acted as thinly disguised movie trailers: when they hear Pretty in Pink, for example, a generation of thirtysomethings imagines not gaunt Psychedelic Furs singer Richard Butler, but the fresh-faced Ringwald. His final great musical coup was putting Yello's Oh Yeah over the car scenes in Ferris. He was the first to get hold of it, and it's remained the gold-standard for expressing consumerist cupidity ever since.

**Where are mom and dad?**

Everyone knows Hughes' greatest line, from The Breakfast Club: "When you grow up, your heart dies." But Hughes didn't just despise parents; he did his utmost to abolish their purpose. In Sixteen Candles, Sam Baker's mum and dad barely notice she exists, let alone remember her birthday. The only authority figure we even glimpse in The Breakfast Club is the crypto-fascist head teacher Paul Gleason. Ferris Bueller's parents are credulous fools, present only to be the butt of Ferris's gift for whip-smart deception. In Pretty in Pink, Andie's dad is around for significant chunks of running time, but he's more childlike than his daughter - a vacuum as much as a presence. And when Hughes left the teen genre, he had his biggest hit with a movie whose entire subject was the absence of parents: Home Alone.

**My kind of town**

The Hughes movies gain their special flavour from their location: Hughes is the laureate of Chicago suburbia, specifically the township of Northbrook, Illinois, where he grew up. Northbrook was fictionalised as Shermer in The Breakfast Club and Weird Science, and the films were shot largely in neighbouring suburbs. And, unlikely as it may seem, Ferris Bueller's Day Off (above) is the most Chicago movie since Little Caesar. Hughes's boosting of Chicago now looks like a symbolic act: neither east nor west, it's an uninflected canvas against which the primal emotions of his teens can play out. Other 80s Brat-Pack movies took their cue from him: Class, About Last Night... and Risky Business were all set in the same geographical area. And in later years, John Cusack, a Hughes protege and a native of yet another Chicago suburb, Evanston, would use his clout to have High Fidelity relocated to the city.

**Three's not a crowd**

Hughes loved a triangle. Structurally speaking, that is: three-way love triangles dominate his scripts. In Sixteen Candles, Samantha yearns after Jake but is hassled by Ted. Pretty in Pink replicates that more gently: Andie is fixated on Blane, but has to deal gently with Duckie's adoration. And, perhaps sensing his difficulties over the ending of Pretty in Pink (Hughes initially didn't want Andie to get together with the snooty Blane, but realised the momentum was unstoppable), he simply reversed the gender equation in Some Kind of Wonderful (above). Eric Stoltz's Keith is the Ringwald figure, caught between the Duckie-ish Watts and the Blane-esque Amanda. This time, though, Hughes has his favoured pair walking off into the sunset together.