

The Necessity for Rebellion in Coming-of-Age Cinema and the Importance of The Breakfast Club

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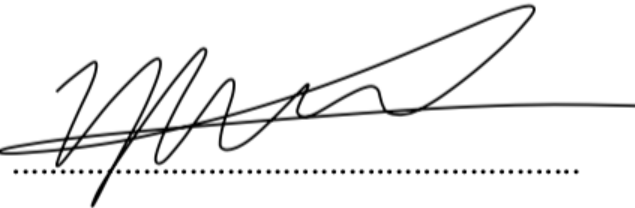
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The old adage that we learn from our mistakes is a common lesson throughout life; that is to say that we are able to make informed and calculated decisions that precipitate our growth through the reflection and understanding of our shortcomings. We have all heard statements such as “we learn from our mistakes” and they suggest that it is these errors and faults that help us mature. Mistakes can come in many forms and even be the result of careful planning and consideration when something goes awry for one reason or another, but in youth these misgivings are more often than not the result of inexperience, childishness and rebellion. The roots of this immaturity tend to run deep and there is often strong and concrete reasoning behind it, but the seemingly mindless actions in adolescence tend to create consequences that enlighten our minds and lead to a much more mindful reaction in the future. It is from these actions that true growth is formed. The coming-of-age genre relies on these precepts in order to properly tell a story that conveys the journey from youth to maturity through rebellion, understanding, realization and growth.

In *The Art of Dramatic Writing* Lajos Egri states “There is no action under the sun which is the origin and the result in one. Everything results from something else; action cannot come of itself” (Egri, 2004, p. 131-132). So where does this rebellion come from? In *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens the character Pip says “In the little world in which children have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice” (Dickens, 1996, p. 63). Is it this sensitivity to injustice in our youth that causes a natural reaction of rebellion towards forms of authority and oppression? Is it the way the world is weighted against young people that causes a perceived lack of fairness and equality? There is certainly a pattern throughout coming-of-age stories (especially in modern times) that the seeds of change are sewn with a rebellious attitude that is determined to challenge the status quo. This resistance to authority can be thought out and calculated just as

much as it can be primal and heedless, but it is often the externally mindless actions that will lead to a realization that then precipitates mindful and calculated actions leading to a character's growth. This is a pattern prevalent throughout these stories where youthful energy is expelled during outwardly impulsive acts that cause a reaction forcing reflection. This reflection often brings a realization that then allows the young person to conduct themselves in a more deliberate and premeditated manner so that this insubordinate energy is now focused in actions and reactions that facilitate the character's growth. This then poses the question: Is it the mindlessness of youth that leads to the mindfulness of adulthood? (Wright, 2020)

Particularly in *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) do we see such a perfect representation of youth and their reactions to societal pressures, a breakdown of communication between themselves and authority figures as well as the ways that rebellion can help them learn about themselves and the world around them in order to achieve growth. As these themes and motifs are explored it will become apparent that in the coming-of-age story we can find not only the answer to these questions but, more importantly, the representation that we so desperately crave, desire and deserve. It is this reality in representation that makes the coming-of-age film so important to exploring the themes of rebellion and maturity in youth. Exploring the frustrations, fears and feelings coupled with adolescence is something that is prevalent across all types of media, but it is the depiction in film that provides a concentrated focus of all these factors.

The Importance of Communication & the Volatility of Suppressed Dreams

The most important part of any relationship is communication. Communication helps us achieve understanding of both parties' wants and needs and through this understanding we're able fulfil those desires, create compromises or cause friction whenever necessary. It is often

represented in coming-of-age films that there is a gap in the communication between the adult and the adolescent, whether it is parent and child or adult and student, more often than not there is an apparent lack of understanding. This causes difficulty in achieving a mutual respect, disrupts goals for both sides and gives each person a feeling of resistance or hostility. The adult character often feels that there is a lack of respect while the juvenile character perceives an injustice of some kind. These problems present themselves as the cornerstone of the plot of any coming-of-age film. In his book I'm OK – You're OK, Thomas A. Harris, M.D.

states:

Many parents today are sorely troubled over the independent ways of today's youth. The thought of letting up on parental pressures is not a welcome one. If anything, some say, we must put the pressure on harder. It is impossible for many parents to believe that anything constructive or practical can reside in the head of a young collegian who wears long hair and protest buttons, and who smokes marijuana, even though those same parents may not be able to build any impressive case for their own short hair, the initiation rites of their fraternal organization, or their cocktail party rituals.

(Harris, 1995, p. 245)

Though some of the descriptions of child and parent might seem outdated by today's standards, the ideas that Harris illustrates are as applicable as ever. There are always vast amounts of differences between the youths and adults of modern times, and whether they are imbalances of ideals, self-expression or identification or things as trivial as fashion-sense and slang terms, this lack of an understanding of each other will forever create a rift in the communication between young person and adult. Although it may be considered that it is not even necessarily the need to be understood completely that will manifest this feeling of injustice in a young person, but more simply the need to be *heard*. Harris remarks "Problem solvers, whether

international or hometown, talk incessantly about the ‘need for a dialogue’ without ever considering the need to define terms” (Harris, 1995, p. 248). So often we find ourselves watching coming-of-age films with two characters (usually a parent and child) in the midst of some kind of intense argument due to conflicting emotions and ideas and we watch these characters fail to find a common ground and descend deeper into their heated animosity towards each other. We realize that if they simply said to each other the things that we, the audience, know they need to say, then these characters could begin to move forward and work towards a better understanding and even a solution. Harris continues:

In Transactional Analysis we have developed a system unique in (1) its definition of terms and (2) its reduction of behaviour to a basic unit for observation. Dialogue, if it is to get us anywhere, must be based on agreement of what to examine and an agreement on the words to describe what we observe. Otherwise we simply stumble over words.

(Harris, 1995, p. 248)

So what comes of these feelings of unfulfillment? How does the characters’ unsatisfied desire to be heard manifest itself in the narrative? When we see someone lashing out it is probably quite easy to dismiss them as disruptive or write them off as a delinquent, but as Egri has stated there is no action that is derived from itself (Egri, 2004, p. 131-132). No action in this world is without root or cause. In *The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959) we see Antoine Doinel write on classroom walls, steal his father’s Michelin Guide, plagiarise the work of Balzac, skip school and eventually run away from home. Are these actions merely that of a delinquent youth, or can we surmise that Antoine has a valid causal reasoning behind this apparently reckless behaviour? Professor Julian Cornell states:

In *400 Blows*, Antoine is a character first, and this is very authentic and real to what young boys are really like. They do stupid stuff for no reason. There's no reason for Antoine to plagiarize from Balzac. What English professor is not going to catch that? But that's a stupid thing a kid would do. And the things that he does — like steal his father's Michelin Guide for no reason — that's what kids do. That's why it's such a pivotal coming-of-age film, because it's the first one that's honest and truthful. That makes it easily understandable to everybody everywhere, and it's why the character is so vivid.

(Cornell, 2016)

Perhaps Professor Cornell has forgotten or disregarded large fragments of the film, but this idea that Antoine's actions are "for no reason" is erroneous. Antoine is mistreated by his schoolteacher, never fully accepted by his stepfather and unwanted by his own mother. Towards the end of the film Antoine engages in an interview with a psychologist at the juvenile detention centre he has been placed in. During this interview he reveals that his mother sent him to live with a wet nurse until he was eight years old and after overhearing an argument between his mother and grandmother he discovered that his mother wanted to have an abortion and it is only thanks to his grandmother that he was born. His mother visits and explains that his stepfather wants nothing to do with him any longer, dismissing any idea of unconditional love from the paternal figure in Antoine's life and severing that tie completely. Suddenly all these insubordinate offenses from Antoine seen previously in the film begin to make sense as the root of his behaviour becomes explained. It seems as though for his entire life up to this point Antoine's desire to be heard was unmet and unfulfilled. What we witness through him is just one of the ways that this dissatisfaction can manifest itself.

This level of discontent is not only found in the adolescent characters however. In order for there to be conflict between youth and the authority figure that oppresses them, that figure too will often have their own unresolved issues, and this can be seen throughout film in many examples. In *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) Principal Vernon expresses fear that the youth of today are the ones that will be taking care of him when he's older, in *Mid90s* (Hill, 2018) Stevie's mom seems to have never truly grappled the responsibility she has in being a mother and in *Lady Bird* (Gerwig, 2017) Lady Bird's father struggles with depression while her mother wrestles with the accountability of performing a thankless job in guiding her wayward daughter and keeping the family's financial matters intact. The insecurities of these authoritative figures exist in a cyclical relationship with the rebellious nature of their subordinate counterparts.

There are also many instances where that authority figure will have a level of animosity towards the adolescence they are surrounded by due to an inability to accept their own lost youth and the inevitability of time. In the film *Flipped* (Reiner, 2010) Bryce's father Steven Loski expresses distaste for the family across the street where the father is a painter and two of the sons have decided to attempt to pursue a career in music. Steven can only seem make superficial and negative remarks about their family and lay baseless accusations against the sons claiming they must be delinquents. These unwarranted prejudices are only enhanced when it is revealed that Steven himself was in a band when he was younger and played the saxophone, exposing that he too had dreams of grandeur in his youth and now that he was middle-aged and settled down with a wife and children, the idea that his glory days were long behind him have only made him bitter and contemptuous. This poses the idea that sometimes the resistance from authority may merely be a reflection of their own misspent youth. One of Langston Hughes' most famous poems, "Harlem", wrestles with this very idea of what happens when hopes and dreams are cast aside:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(Hughes, 1951)

Although Hughes' poem deals primarily with racial injustice in America, the theme is universal; that when expectations fall short of their desired outcome the burden is immense. While this encumbrance of a dream deferred can manifest itself in many ways, most of which are negative, the most likely scenario is illustrated in the last line of Hughes' poem; it explodes. In the film *Flipped* it can be seen seeping out of Steven's character until he has a sudden violent outburst after being criticized by his daughter. His behaviour has been made apparent and brought out into the open and once he can't hide his failures and shortcomings any longer that dream deferred explodes.

The breakdown of communication has many negative ways of effecting each individual. Antoine Doinel misbehaves and acts rashly, Steven Loski harbours unspoken resentment and

commits an act of domestic violence and the characters in *The Breakfast Club* all find themselves in Saturday morning detention for reasons stemming from this inability to communicate with their superiors and a desire to be heard by those authority figures.

Examining The Breakfast Club

On March 24th, 1984 at Shermer High School in Shermer, Illinois, five students find themselves stuck in Saturday detention for nine hours. Over the course of those nine hours, they manage to explore their feelings, tear down preconceived notions of each other and better understand the world around them and the way that it attempts to confine people into their respective castes. *The Breakfast Club* is considered by many to be one of the seminal works of the coming-of-age genre. Its realistic portrayals of youth culture and their environment was ground-breaking for its time.

The film opens with an unseen narrator speaking over images of Shermer High School. The voice is of Brian Johnson but as we have not met his character yet we are simply aware that it is an adolescent male voice. The voiceover states:

Dear Mr. Vernon, we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was we did wrong. What we did was wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write an essay telling you who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us... in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed...

(The Breakfast Club, 1985)

From the very beginning of the film, we're introduced to this idea that each student seems to have been stereotyped as a member of their respective category in the social caste system of their high school. Although the letter is addressed to Principal Vernon, these preconceived notions about the type of person each student is extends to the students just as much as it does to the teachers. Not only do the students manage to place themselves in these classifications, but the adults seem to reinforce it.

The opening scene of *The Breakfast Club* tells us so much about each character in a matter of six minutes. Upon arrival at school Claire says to her father "I can't believe you can't get me out of this" showing her feeling of entitlement by viewing herself above all the other students. She reinforces this feeling of superiority as she goes on to remark "It's so absurd I have to be here on a Saturday, it's not like I'm a defective or anything." Her father promises to make it up to her and supports her opinion that ditching class to go shopping does not make her defective, both showing us the reason for Claire's time in detention as well as illustrating that her father seems to have imparted these viewpoints onto Claire.

Brian's arrival at the school involves his mother telling him to use his time to do something productive and, when Brian explains that they're not allowed to study, she aggressively tells him to "figure out a way to study". We can assume that Brian is "the brain" mentioned in the opening voiceover and that his parents put pressure on him to excel academically.

Andrew is dropped off at the school by his father. Before exiting the car, his father explains that although he screwed around in high school as well, he never got caught and that is Andrew's biggest fault in this situation. Andrew's dad then puts emphasis on how his behaviour might affect any athletic scholarships that he's been offered, going on to say "No school is going to give a scholarship to a discipline case!" Never at any point does Andrew's

father try to explain that what Andrew did was wrong or that he should reflect or learn from his behaviour, he simply highlights the importance of Andrew's performance athletically.

John Bender arrives by walking up to the school unaccompanied by anyone. He is the only student that isn't dropped off by their parent in a vehicle. As he walks across the carpark, he is nearly hit by an oncoming automobile that brakes just before reaching him and Bender continues his stride unfazed. It is clear that his parents did not find it important to bring him to the school themselves and we do not witness any conversation with them or any attempt by them to comment on his reason for being in detention.

The last student to arrive (in the car that broke just short of hitting John Bender) is Allison. She gets out of the backseat of the vehicle and walks towards the passenger side door in an attempt to speak to whichever parent brought her, but the car speeds off without engaging in any way. It is apparent that Allison has a desire to speak to her parent, but they do not seem to have the desire to speak to her or hear her. This breakdown of communication between Allison and her parents is reflected within the issues of all the other students in detention that morning, not only with their parents but with the administration of that school as well.

The way the students enter into the library where detention is being held speaks volumes. There are a row of tables and Claire sits at the front, showing the way she views her own social status in school and Andrew sits at the same table with her. Brian takes the table behind them until Bender arrives and kicks Brian out of his seat, highlighting his need to assert dominance and Brian's willingness to submit and avoid confrontation. Allison arrives last and takes an unnecessarily long route around the tables, behind the statue and selecting the seat in the back that is furthest away from everybody else. Without anyone speaking, these characters have already communicated their preconceived notions of themselves and each other. It is only

when these characters begin interacting verbally that they begin to realize how alike they all are as their inner emotions are exposed.

The first time Andrew has a moment away from the group he finds himself with Allison, the basket case of the group. It is in this moment that he sees fit to open up to her on a personal level. He tells her:

I'm here today because my coach and my father don't want me to blow my ride. See, I get treated differently because coach thinks I'm a winner. So does my old man. I'm not a winner because I want to be one. I'm a winner because I've got strength and speed. Kind of like a racehorse. That's about how involved I am in what's happening to me.

(The Breakfast Club, 1985)

The last sentence that Andrew utters to Allison perfectly captures his true feelings about his life and his place in the school. It is only when he is alone with her that he begins to let his guard down and make his true feelings known.

In the book Into the Woods by John Yorke, Yorke states:

Subtext ... emerges from the interaction between a character's façade and their actual intention or goal. Under pressure to express their true feelings, characters struggle to keep up their mask. As want collides with need, the greater truth – the gap between what characters say and do – is revealed. And that gap is the stuff of drama.

(Yorke, 2014, p. 164)

As the film progresses the characters begin to open up to each other and learn more about each students' home life and the reasons why they behave the way they do. Suddenly all the prejudiced ideas they had of each other come crashing down and they begin to find that none of them are terribly dissimilar from one another at all. During the "group therapy" scene, most of the members of the group reveal their reason for being in Saturday detention that day. To

the parents and the staff of the school these actions that are mentioned may seem like reckless trivialities associated with youthful misguidance, but as we delve deeper into the characters' psyches, we can see that they are echoes of the pressures and insecurities felt by the students. Andrew expresses shame and regret at the way he harassed another student, all in an effort to impress his father who told Andrew similar stories of his own time in high school. Brian explains that he had brought a gun to school because he couldn't cope with the thought of getting a failing grade on a project, thus highlighting the intense amount of pressure he feels to perform well academically. Although Brian and Andrew's pursuits are different, the weight placed on their shoulders by their superiors has the same effect and, in that moment, they are able to connect. In a previous scene Allison reveals that the horrible act her parents commit against her is the fact they ignore her. During the "group therapy" scene Allison tells the group she hadn't committed any act to get her sent to detention, but simply "didn't have anything better to do", emphasizing her desire to be seen and accepted by anyone due to her parents' inability to give her any attention at all.

It seems that Saturday detention is a regular occurrence for John Bender and, regardless of his reason for being there that particular Saturday, any behaviour that puts him in that situation can be easily seen as a response to his difficult homelife. In Story by Robert McKee, McKee states "Human nature is fundamentally conservative. We never do more than we have to, expend any energy we don't have to, take any risks we don't have to, change *if we don't have to*." John Bender would not commit all the acts of rebellion that he has become so well acquainted with if he didn't *have to*. It's a need that is inside of him and he is using this energy to lash out as a way of dealing with an unhappy homelife. The rest of the students are doing exactly the same. Even though their circumstances may be different they all share the same constant that their parents don't understand them, they can't communicate with them, they live

an ultimately unhappy and unfulfilling homelife and they rebel, each in their own way, as a means of expending that energy necessary for a change in their development. They may not even realize it themselves when it happens, but it is a subconscious effort on their part to try and advance to a higher level of understanding so that they may grow. These ostensibly mindless acts of rebellion led them to a Saturday detention where they are forced to spend nine hours with completely different members of their high school social ladder and in doing so they learn very valuable lessons about themselves and each other. So can we say that these acts of rebellion and reckless behaviour are really mindless at all? Or is it the subconscious of the youth finding a way to help themselves mature?

It is easy to see Principal Vernon as the authority figure that is oppressing the students, but it is in fact society itself that is their oppressive force. The students in *The Breakfast Club* don't work together to overcome Principal Vernon, but instead overcome the pressures placed on them by society to fit into their respective categories and castes. Vernon himself is a victim in his own way. He has his own insecurities, anxieties and fears that he discusses with Carl the janitor in a crucial scene. Vernon expresses a distaste for the children of today, claiming they get more arrogant each year. He voices fear that these children will be the ones making decisions and taking care of him when he's older. Carl explains to Vernon that the children have not changed at all, but instead he has. Vernon refuses to accept this, but it is wholly fitting that Carl is the one Vernon is having this conversation with. In one of the opening shots of the film we see a young Carl's picture on the wall of the high school under a plaque that reads "Man of the Year". It's clear that Carl was one of the popular kids in this same high school and now he has been reduced to the role of janitor once he entered adult life. This reflects the idea that the students of today represent to Principal Vernon the youth he has since lost. Carl is most likely right in his assessment of the children of today and this lack of communication that

Vernon has with modern children only results in his perceived disrespect and a breakdown of the relationship they have with him.

Returning to the opening of the film and the task that Vernon sets before the kids, to write an essay about who they think they really are, it is clear that Principal Vernon is more interested in categorizing these students than he is in properly educating them. In his eyes the need for order comes above all others as he himself tries to make sense of the world around him. When confronted with the antics of John Bender, Vernon chooses to make an example out of him to the students rather than attempt to appeal to Bender or educate him. Vernon says:

You think he's funny? You think this is cute? You think he's bitchin', is that it? Let me tell you something. Look at him. He's a bum. You want to see something funny? You go visit John Bender in five years. You'll see how goddamned funny he is.

(The Breakfast Club, 1985)

It's clear that Vernon has already written off Bender as a hopeless delinquent and has no intention of trying to help him mature or grow. Principal Vernon likely views the Saturday detention as punishment rather than an opportunity for reform. Vernon must hope that the task they are given of writing an essay describing who they think they really are will simply reinforce the stereotypes that he's placed them in and bring order to a world he perceives as increasingly chaotic. That is why there's so much importance in the students' response. Vernon has viewed these malfeasances as misguided and reckless behaviour: mindless rebellion. He is unaware that these acts that landed them in Saturday morning detention are the direct result of emotional energy being expelled due to a variety of reasons stemming from an unhappy homelife, societal pressures and authoritarian oppression. It is these same "mindless acts" that lead to their ability to open a dialogue amongst themselves, gain a higher level of understanding and advance these teenage children one step further into maturity and adulthood. The final lines

of the film repeat Brian's all-encompassing essay response from the beginning, although instead of stating "You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal" the group declares "but what we found it is that each one of us is a brain and an athlete and a basket case, a princess and a criminal" showing that they've fully accepted there are similar aspects of these stereotypes within all of them and that they are all truly equals. The final narration omits the line about being brainwashed and simply asks Principal Vernon "Does that answer your question?" The rhetorical question as the final line of the film perfectly points out the flaws in Vernon's way of thinking as well as rejecting the caste system these children have been placed in and the way they've been stereotyped by society as a whole, thus rebelling against their true oppressor in a method that advances their knowledge of the world and themselves. This very mindful rebellion facilitates growth, allowing these characters to reach a higher level of understanding and come of age.

Rebellion, Change and Growth

There is a quotation from the David Bowie song "Changes" on screen at the beginning of *The Breakfast Club*:

...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...

(Bowie, 1971)

This quote perfectly encapsulates the journey that the viewer is about to embark on. The youth

are more in tune and self-aware than any oppressive authority figure or society will give them credit for. They are actively trying to correct the archaic institutions and viewpoints of the past and, as they do so, those same outdated modes of thinking rest in the minds of the very people that will try to diminish and expunge the efforts of these youth. While young people enact seemingly rash exertions that appear as mindless acts of rebellion, a less-aware authority figure will almost always try to educate and/or execute punishment based on their obsolete viewpoints and in doing so will be met with a reaction that is perceived as hostility and disrespect. These consultations that Bowie refers to in his song lyrics are that of a dying culture. The young people of today find themselves immune to these empty or misguided attempts at seeing things the way that their parents did; they know better than that. Even though their defiance is seen as senseless insurrection they know that deep down it is a response to being underappreciated, undervalued and unheard in a world that's not yet ready to accept them. This need for a dialogue, for discussion and communication, is prevalent in the problems that youth culture face, and it is evidently portrayed throughout coming-of-age cinema as we witness the struggle for representation and the desire to be heard as these characters attempt to make the best of the situations they've been presented with. More often than not these are characters whose disdainful attitude of today's institutions are reflected in the lost dreams and disappointments of their parents. Rather than adding to the vicious circle of losing hope and wrestling with the discontent of a system that has failed them, the characters do what they can in an attempt to rise above a bar that has been set by the superiors in their life.

Throughout *The Breakfast Club* and many other coming-of-age films this pattern can be seen over and over again: the desire to be heard and a breakdown of communication between the youth and the authority figures, essentially a matter of past versus present (with the present also representing the future). Yorke writes "Change is ... inextricably linked to dramatic desire:

if a character wants something, they are going to have to change to get it” (Yorke, 2014, p. 46).

The need for rebellion in the face of oppression is the only way that the characters can begin to build the foundations they need for growth and freedom; it is the cornerstone of their development. These irresponsible actions that seem so blindly defiant and reckless are, in fact, an absolute necessity to ensure the proper evolution of our beloved characters and without this rebellion, this ability to stand up in the face oppression and attempt to subvert the dominant paradigm, true growth can never be achieved. Youth without revolt is stagnant.

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