THE NEW YORKER

WHAT ABOUT "THE BREAKFAST CLUB"?

Revisiting the movies of my youth in the age of #MeToo.

By Molly Ringwald April 6, 2018

Earlier this year, the Criterion Collection, which is "dedicated to gathering the greatest films from around the world," released a restored version of "The Breakfast Club," a film written and directed by John Hughes that I acted in, more than three decades ago. For this edition, I participated in an interview about the movie, as did other people close to the production. I don't make a habit of revisiting films I've made, but this was not the first time I'd returned to this one: a few years back, I watched it with my daughter, who was ten at the time. We recorded a conversation about it for the radio show "This American Life." I'll be the first to admit that ten is far too young for a viewing of "The Breakfast Club," a movie about five high-school students who befriend one other during a Saturday detention session, with plenty of cursing, sex talk, and a now-famous scene of the students smoking pot. But my daughter insisted that her friends had already seen it, and she said she didn't want to watch it for the first time in front of other people. A writer-director friend assured me that kids tend to filter out what they don't understand, and I figured that it would be better if I were there to answer the uncomfortable questions. So I relented, thinking perhaps that it would make for a sweet if unconventional mother-daughter bonding moment.

It's a strange experience, watching a younger, more innocent version of yourself onscreen. It's stranger still—surreal, even—watching it with your child when she is much closer in age to that version of yourself than you are. My friend was right: my daughter didn't really seem to register most of the sex stuff, though she did audibly gasp when she thought I had showed my underwear. At one point in the film, the bad-boy character, John Bender, ducks under the table where my character, Claire, is sitting, to hide from a teacher. While there, he takes the opportunity to peek under Claire's skirt and, though the audience doesn't see, it is implied that he touches her inappropriately. I was quick to point out to my daughter that the person in the underwear wasn't *really* me, though that clarification seemed inconsequential. We kept watching, and, despite my best intentions to give context to the uncomfortable

bits, I didn't elaborate on what might have gone on under the table. She expressed no curiosity in anything sexual, so I decided to follow her lead, and discuss what seemed to resonate with her more. Maybe I just chickened out.

But I kept thinking about that scene. I thought about it again this past fall, after a number of women came forward with sexual-assault accusations against the producer Harvey Weinstein, and the #MeToo movement gathered steam. If attitudes toward female subjugation are systemic, and I believe that they are, it stands to reason that the art we consume and sanction plays some part in reinforcing those same attitudes. I made three movies with John Hughes; when they were released, they made enough of a cultural impact to land me on the cover of *Time* magazine and to get Hughes hailed as a genius. His critical reputation has only grown since he died, in 2009, at the age of fifty-nine. Hughes's films play constantly on television and are even taught in schools. There is still so much that I love in them, but lately I have felt the need to examine the role that these movies have played in our cultural life: where they came from, and what they might mean now. When my daughter proposed watching "The Breakfast Club" together, I had hesitated, not knowing how she would react: if she would understand the film or if she would even like it. I worried that she would find aspects of it troubling, but I hadn't anticipated that it would ultimately be most troubling to me.

It can be hard to remember how scarce art for and about teen-agers was before John Hughes arrived. Young-adult novels had not yet exploded as a genre. Onscreen, the big issues that affected teens seemed to belong largely to the world of ABC Afterschool Specials, which premièred in 1972 and were still around as I came of age, in the eighties. All the teens I knew would rather have died than watch one. The films had the whiff of sanctimony, the dialogue was obviously written by adults, the music was corny.

Portrayals of teen-agers in movies were even worse. The actors cast in teen roles tended to be much older than their characters—they had to be, since the films were so frequently exploitative. The teen horror flicks that flourished in the seventies and eighties had them getting murdered: if you were young, attractive, and sexually active, your chances of making it to the end were basically nil (a trope spoofed, years later, by the "Scream" franchise). The successful teen comedies of the period, such as "Animal House" and "Porky's," were written by men for boys; the few women in them were either nymphomaniacs or battleaxes. (The stout female coach in "Porky's" is named Balbricker.) The boys are perverts, as one-dimensional as their female

counterparts, but with more screen time. In 1982, "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," which had the rare distinction of being directed by a woman, Amy Heckerling, got closer to an authentic depiction of adolescence. But it still made room for a young male's fantasy of the actress Phoebe Cates striding topless in a soft-porny sprinkler mist.

And then Hughes came along. Hughes, who grew up in Michigan and Illinois, got work, after dropping out of college, writing ad copy in Chicago. The job brought him frequently to New York, where he started hanging around the offices of the humor magazine *National Lampoon*. He wrote a story called "Vacation '58"—inspired by his own family trips—which secured him a job at the magazine and became the basis for the movie "National Lampoon's Vacation." Another story caught the eye of the producer Lauren Shuler Donner, who encouraged him to write what became "Mr. Mom." Those movies helped him get a deal with Universal Studios. "The Breakfast Club" was to be his directorial début; he planned to shoot it in Chicago with local actors. He told me later that, over a July 4th weekend, while looking at headshots of actors to consider for the movie, he found mine, and decided to write another movie around the character he imagined that girl to be. That script became "Sixteen Candles," a story about a girl whose family forgets her sixteenth birthday. The studio loved the script, perhaps because, in form at least, it had more in common with proven successes—"Porky's" et al.—than it did with "The Breakfast Club," which basically read like a play.

A meeting was arranged, we hit it off, and I filmed "Sixteen Candles" in the suburbs of Chicago the summer after I completed the ninth grade. Once we were done shooting, and before we began filming "The Breakfast Club," John wrote another movie specifically for me, "Pretty in Pink," about a working-class girl navigating the social prejudices of her affluent high school. The film's dramatic arc involves getting invited and then uninvited to the prom. In synopsis, the movies can seem flimsy—a girl loses her date to a dance, a family forgets a girl's birthday—but that's part of what made them unique. No one in Hollywood was writing about the minutiae of high school, and certainly not from a female point of view. According to one study, since the late nineteen-forties, in the top-grossing family movies, girl characters have been outnumbered by boys three to one—and that ratio has not improved. That two of Hughes's films had female protagonists in the lead roles and examined these young women's feelings about the fairly ordinary things that were happening to them, while also managing to have instant cred that translated into success at the

box office, was an anomaly that has never really been replicated. (The few blockbuster films starring young women in recent years have mostly been set in dystopian futures or have featured vampires and werewolves.)

I had what could be called a symbiotic relationship with John during the first two of those films. I've been called his muse, which I believe I was, for a little while. But, more than that, I felt that he listened to me—though certainly not all the time. Coming out of the *National Lampoon* school of comedy, there was still a residue of crassness that clung, no matter how much I protested. In the shooting script of "The Breakfast Club," there was a scene in which an attractive female gym teacher swam naked in the school's swimming pool as Mr. Vernon, the teacher who is in charge of the students' detention, spied on her. The scene wasn't in the first draft I read, and I lobbied John to cut it. He did, and although I'm sure the actress who had been cast in the part still blames me for foiling her break, I think the film is better for it. In "Sixteen Candles," a character alternately called the Geek and Farmer Ted makes a bet with friends that he can score with my character, Samantha; by way of proof, he says, he will secure her underwear. Later in the film, after Samantha agrees to help the Geek by loaning her underwear to him, she has a heartwarming scene with her father. It originally ended with the father asking, "Sam, what the hell happened to your underpants?" My mom objected. "Why would a father know what happened to his daughter's underwear?" she asked. John squirmed uncomfortably. He didn't mean it that way, he said—it was just a joke, a punch line. "But it's not funny," my mother said. "It's creepy." The line was changed to "Just remember, Sam, you wear the pants in the family."

My mom also spoke up during the filming of that scene in "The Breakfast Club," when they hired an adult woman for the shot of Claire's underwear. They couldn't even ask me to do it—I don't think it was permitted by law to ask a minor—but even having another person pretend to be me was embarrassing to me and upsetting to my mother, and she said so. That scene stayed, though. What's more, as I can see now, Bender sexually harasses Claire throughout the film. When he's not sexualizing her, he takes out his rage on her with vicious contempt, calling her "pathetic," mocking her as "Queenie." It's rejection that inspires his vitriol. Claire acts dismissively toward him, and, in a pivotal scene near the end, she predicts that at school on Monday morning, even though the group has bonded, things will return, socially, to the status quo. "Just bury your head in the sand and wait for your fuckin'

prom!" Bender yells. He never apologizes for any of it, but, nevertheless, he gets the girl in the end.

If I sound overly critical, it's only with hindsight. Back then, I was only vaguely aware of how inappropriate much of John's writing was, given my limited experience and what was considered normal at the time. I was well into my thirties before I stopped considering verbally abusive men more interesting than the nice ones. I'm a little embarrassed to say that it took even longer for me to fully comprehend the scene late in "Sixteen Candles," when the dreamboat, Jake, essentially trades his drunk girlfriend, Caroline, to the Geek, to satisfy the latter's sexual urges, in return for Samantha's underwear. The Geek takes Polaroids with Caroline to have proof of his conquest; when she wakes up in the morning with someone she doesn't know, he asks her if she "enjoyed it." (Neither of them seems to remember much.) Caroline shakes her head in wonderment and says, "You know, I have this weird feeling I did." She had to have a feeling about it, rather than a thought, because thoughts are things we have when we are conscious, and she wasn't.

Thinking about that scene, I became curious how the actress who played Caroline, Haviland Morris, felt about the character she portrayed. So I sent her an e-mail. We hadn't seen or spoken to each other since she was twenty-three and I was fifteen. We met for coffee, and after we had filled each other in on all the intervening years, I asked her about it. Haviland, I was surprised to learn, does not have the same issues with the scene as I do. In her mind, Caroline bears some responsibility for what happens, because of how drunk she gets at the party. "I'm not saying that it's O.K. to then be raped or to have nonconsensual sex," Haviland clarified. "But … that's not a one-way street. Here's a girl who gets herself so bombed that she doesn't even know what's going on."

There was a time in my early twenties when I had too much to drink at a party and ended up in a bedroom sitting on the edge of a bed with a producer I didn't know, lightheaded and woozy. A good friend, who had followed me, popped her head in the door a couple of minutes later and announced, "Time to go now, Molly!" I followed her out, trying not to stumble, and spent the rest of the night violently ill and embarrassed—and the rest of my life grateful that she had been there, watching out for me, when I was temporarily incapable of watching out for myself. I shared the story with Haviland, and she listened politely, nodding.

Haviland, like me, has children, and so I decided to frame the question hypothetically, mother to mother, to see if it changed her point of view. If one of our kids had too much to drink, and something like that happened to one of them, would she say, "It's on you, because you drank too much"? She shook her head: "No. Absolutely, positively, it stays in your pants until invited by someone who is willing and consensually able to invite you to remove it." Still, she added, "I'm not going to black-and-white it. It isn't a one-way street."

After our coffee, I responded to an e-mail from Haviland to thank her for agreeing to talk to me. Later that night, I received another note. "You know," she wrote, "the more I think of it this evening, oddly, the LESS uncomfortable I am with Caroline. Jake was disgusted with her and said he could violate her 17 ways if he wanted to because she was so trashed, but he didn't. And then, Ted was the one who had to ask if they had had sex, which certainly doesn't demonstrate responsible behavior from either party, but also doesn't really spell date rape. On the other hand, she was basically traded for a pair of underwear … Ah, John Hughes."

It's hard for me to understand how John was able to write with so much sensitivity, and also have such a glaring blind spot. Looking for insight into that darkness, I decided to read some of his early writing for *National Lampoon*. I bought an old issue of the magazine on eBay, and found the other stories, all from the late seventies and early eighties, online. They contain many of the same themes he explored in his films, but with none of the humanity. Yes, it was a different time, as people say. Still, I was taken aback by the scope of the ugliness.

"A Dog's Tale" has a boy watching his mother turn into a dog. "Against His Will" features an "ugly fat" woman who tries to rape a man at gunpoint in front of the man's wife and parents because she can't have sex any other way. "My Penis" and "My Vagina" are quasi-magical-realist stories written from the points of view of teen-agers who wake up in the morning with different genitalia than they were assigned at birth; the protagonist of "My Penis" literally forces her boyfriend's mouth open to penetrate him, and the male in "My Vagina" is gang-raped by his friends once they discover he has one. (The latter story ends with him having to use the money he saved for new skis on getting an abortion.) The "Hughes Engagement Guide" is an illustrated manual on how to protect yourself against women. It gives examples of women "bullshitting to not put out," and teaches readers how to do a "quickie pelvic exam," how to detect "signs of future fat," and how to determine if a woman has any ancestors of different races, based on what her relatives look like—

there is an accompanying drawing of an Asian person and an African-American—and on and on.

The October, 1980, issue included a piece, co-authored by Ted Mann, titled "Sexual Harassment and How to Do It!" The guide explains, "If you hire a woman from another field or with a background that is not suited to the duties she is to assume, you've got the glans in the crevice, or, if you prefer, the foot in the door." It continues, "Not only will her humility prepare her for your sexual advances, it will also help steel her for her inevitable dismissal." There are sections describing different kinds of secretaries based on their ages, and how best to reward and punish them. (The older ones are "easier," the younger ones "preferable.") There's even a section on arrest: "Sometimes even guys with cool sideburns and a smooth line of patter get arrested for sexual harassment and are issued summonses." It goes on to suggest different methods for cozying up to the police officer.

It's all satire, of course, but it's pretty clear that it's not the chauvinists who are being lampooned but the "women's liberation movement." Women had begun to speak out, in the mid-seventies, against harassment in the workplace. (The beloved movie "9 to 5," in which three women get revenge on a sexist boss, was released in December of 1980, two months after the Hughes-Mann piece ran.) Mann is now a writer and producer who has been nominated for seven Emmys, most recently for his work on the Showtime series "Homeland." I sent him an e-mail asking what he now thought of the piece he wrote with Hughes. He replied that he didn't remember ever having written it. "It looks like one of our art director Peter's desperate page fillers," he explained, referring to Peter Kleinman. "It wouldn't fly today and it never should have flown then," he went on, adding, "These were degenerate cocaine days."

I can't vouch, personally, for any cocaine days that John may or may not have had. When I knew him, he never expressed an interest in doing drugs of any kind, including alcohol—with the exception of cigarettes, which he smoked constantly.

John believed in me, and in my gifts as an actress, more than anyone else I've known, and he was the first person to tell me that I had to write and direct one day. He was also a phenomenal grudge-keeper, and he could respond to perceived rejection in much the same way the character of Bender did in "The Breakfast Club." But I'm not thinking about the man right now but of the films that he left behind. Films that I am proud of in so many ways. Films that, like his earlier writing,

though to a much lesser extent, could also be considered racist, misogynistic, and, at times, homophobic. The words "fag" and "faggot" are tossed around with abandon; the character of Long Duk Dong, in "Sixteen Candles," is a grotesque stereotype, as other writers have detailed far more eloquently than I could.

And yet I have been told more times than I could count, by both friends and strangers, including people in the L.G.B.T. community, that the films "saved" them. Leaving a party not long ago, I was stopped by Emil Wilbekin, a gay, African-American friend of a friend, who wanted to tell me just that. I smiled and thanked him, but what I wanted to say was "Why?" There is barely a person of color to be found in the films, and no characters are openly gay. A week or so after the party, I asked my friend to put me in touch with him. In an e-mail, Wilbekin, a journalist who created an organization called Native Son, devoted to empowering gay black men, expanded upon what he had said to me as I had left the party. "The Breakfast Club," he explained, saved his life by showing him, a kid growing up in Cincinnati in the eighties, "that there were other people like me who were struggling with their identities, feeling out of place in the social constructs of high school, and dealing with the challenges of family ideals and pressures." These kids were also "finding themselves and being 'other' in a very traditional, white, heteronormative environment." The lack of diversity didn't bother him, he added, "because the characters and storylines were so beautifully human, perfectly imperfect and flawed." He watched the films in high school, and while he was not yet out, he had a pretty good idea that he was gay.

"Pretty in Pink" features a character, Duckie, who was loosely based on my best friend of forty years, Matthew Freeman. We've been friends since I was ten, and he worked as a production assistant on the film. Like Emil, he's out now, but wasn't then. (It's one of the reasons I've often posited, to the consternation of some fans and the delight of others, that Duckie is gay, though there's nothing to indicate that in the script.) "The characters John created spoke to feeling invisible and an outsider," Matt told me recently. They got at "how we felt as closeted gay kids who could only live vicariously through others' sexual awakenings, lest we get found out with the very real threat of being ostracized or pummelled."

John's movies convey the anger and fear of isolation that adolescents feel, and seeing that others might feel the same way is a balm for the trauma that teen-agers experience. Whether that's enough to make up for the impropriety of the films is hard to say—even criticizing them makes me feel like I'm divesting a generation of

some of its fondest memories, or being ungrateful since they helped to establish my career. And yet embracing them entirely feels hypocritical. And yet, and yet. …

How are we meant to feel about art that we both love and oppose? What if we are in the unusual position of having helped create it? Erasing history is a dangerous road when it comes to art—change is essential, but so, too, is remembering the past, in all of its transgression and barbarism, so that we may properly gauge how far we have come, and also how far we still need to go.

While researching this piece, I came across an article that was published in *Seventeen* magazine, in 1986, for which I interviewed John. (It was the only time I did so.) He talked about the artists who inspired him when he was younger—Bob Dylan, John Lennon—and how, as soon as they "got comfortable" in their art, they moved on. I pointed out that he had already done a lot of movies about suburbia, and asked him whether he felt that he should move on as his idols had. "I think it's wise for people to concern themselves with the things they know about," he said. He added, "I'd feel extremely self-conscious writing about something I don't know."

I'm not sure that John was ever really comfortable or satisfied. He often told me that he didn't think he was a good enough writer for prose, and although he loved to write, he notoriously hated to revise. I was set to make one more Hughes film, when I was twenty, but felt that it needed rewriting. Hughes refused, and the film was never made, though there could have been other circumstances I was not aware of.

In the interview, I asked him if he thought teen-agers were looked at differently than when he was that age. "Definitely," he said. "My generation had to be taken seriously because we were stopping things and burning things. We were able to initiate change, because we had such vast numbers. We were part of the Baby Boom, and when we moved, everything moved with us. But now, there are fewer teens, and they aren't taken as seriously as we were. You make a teen-age movie, and critics say, 'How dare you?' There's just a general lack of respect for young people now."

John wanted people to take teens seriously, and people did. The films are still taught in schools because good teachers want their students to know that what they feel and say is important; that if they talk, adults and peers will listen. I think that it's ultimately the greatest value of the films, and why I hope they will endure. The conversations about them will change, and they should. It's up to the following

generations to figure out how to continue those conversations and make them their own—to keep talking, in schools, in activism and art—and trust that we care.

Molly Ringwald is an actress, author, and singer. She lives with her family in New York. *Read more »*

Video

The Students Who Fought for Change
From the United States to Iran, students led social movements that are changing the course of history.