

READING: “Social Mobility in Reagan Era Teen Films”

I. Reaganomic Optimism and the National Fantasy of Upward Mobility

When I was in grade school, they told me that when I grew up I could be whatever I wanted. And I believed them. — Emilio Estevez in *Wisdom* (1987)

“The people love Ronald Reagan,” wrote journalist Max Hastings of the *London Times* in 1986. “Reagan understands, as our media and intellectual elite do not, that the most prevalent feature of American character is forward-looking optimism.” Reagan himself personified the central tenets of the economic policy that would win the trust of most Americans: a firm belief in the possibility of social advancement, the inevitable reward of hard work, and the virtuous pursuit of wealth. Reagan was his own narrative of upward mobility, having grown up in a family that was, in his own words, “poor,” and his autobiography details his rise. Reagan’s embodiment of the fairy-tale rise prompted Lou Cannon of *The Washington Post* to write that the “obligatory mythology for modern Republican Presidents requires that they be of humble origin, preferably born in a small town, and that they share a vision of an America redeemed by the values of hard work and upward striving. Ronald Wilson Reagan qualifies.” Despite his family’s poverty, Reagan “believed that success was there for the taking,” and he carried with him from the outset the optimism that would characterize his presidency.

1. How did Reagan’s upbringing inform his belief system? What did Reagan believe?

This optimism bolstered a positive perception of wealth from the first moments of Reagan’s inauguration on January 20, 1981. Reaganites unanimously delivered a clear message of glitter and gold, and *The Washington Post’s* extensive coverage of the inaugural weekend pointed repeatedly to the opulence that characterized the events. Donnie Radcliffe wrote, “The Republican aristocracy took over Washington this weekend, making it safe again to put on diamonds and designer gowns.” Elisabeth Bumiller added, “Forget the Republican cloth coat. This year: mink.”

But the inauguration masked a darker national truth. One week prior, *Newsweek* had proclaimed in enormous letters on its front cover, “Economy in Crisis.” A public opinion poll from ABC News on February 20th, one month to the day after Reagan’s inauguration, revealed heightened public awareness of the dire state of the American economy. Despite the acknowledgement that conditions were worsening, the polls indicated an even firmer belief that it would strengthen in the coming months. Fully 89% of those polled claimed familiarity with Reagan’s proposed economic policy, which involved a series of three tax cuts for those in higher income brackets. Respondents overwhelmingly believed that the proposed cuts would hurt the poor and benefit the wealthy. Despite this imbalance, a vast majority (72%) approved of these measures regardless of who would be hurt. Reaganomics, if the polls are to be believed, was embraced by a count of about three-to-one, numbers that offer key insights into the perception of class and the public’s class allegiance at the outset of Reagan’s first term.

The optimism reflected by Reagan and by the poll numbers was initially bolstered by an actual improvement in the nation’s economy. Six months into his first term, *Fortune* magazine contentedly reported that “after-tax incomes should climb briskly over the period ahead – 4% a year in real terms compared with a 1% rate in the last year and a half.” The

outlook was even stronger by the end of 1981, and *Fortune's* year-end panel of experts on the economy, including Fed. Chairman Alan Greenspan, prophesied a “robust recovery.” Given the rosy path envisioned by economists, it is no coincidence that, according to Haynes Johnson, “the Reagan years saw the reemergence of luxury as a national goal.” The desire to rise, which some consider a staple characteristic of American culture, had an emboldened authority reflected in the films of this period.

2. The economic situation in 1980 was dire, yet Reagan’s tax plan was widely supported (by nearly 72% of Americans!) Why do you think that was? How do you account for that?

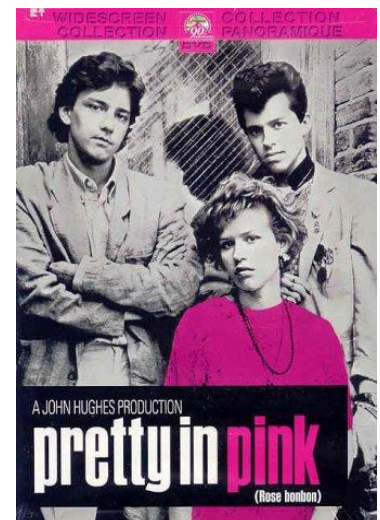
II. Cinematic Optimism and the Narrated Fantasy of Upward Mobility

I’ve never seen such a vulgar display of wealth in my life! How do I get one?

— Andrew McCarthy to Rob Lowe in *Class* (1983)

In her 1986 review of *Pretty in Pink*, Pauline Kael makes a statement that usefully frames the cinematic portrayal of social mobility during the Reagan years: *In the movies of the 1920s and 1930s, it was common for heroines (and heroes) to be ashamed of their poverty and to feel a vast social gap between them and the secure rich. But in the years after the Second World War, as people moved up in the society, the movie fantasy of marrying rich lost its romantic appeal. Has this fantasy been returning in ‘80s movies such as “Flashdance,” “Valley Girl,” and “Pretty in Pink” . . . ? Whatever the reason, class consciousness has been making a comeback, but not in any kind of realistic or political context; what we’re getting is strictly the fantasy theme of love bridging the gap.*

Studios made numerous movies for teens in the 1980s, largely due to what Bernstein terms a sudden rise in “adolescent spending power,” the side-effect of a general economic boom. (The PG-13 rating, introduced in 1985, testifies to an increase in movie-going teens at the time.) Faith in the almighty market as an engine for upward mobility, and fantasies of class-permeability in general, pervade American cinema in the early 1980s, and John Hughes enters this dynamic when he lets the poor guy get the rich prom queen in *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and the poor girl get the rich guy in *Pretty in Pink*. However, the differences between *Pretty in Pink* and Hughes’ next movie, *Some Kind of Wonderful*, chart the starker pessimism of the decade’s end.



3. How do films in the 1980s, particularly teen films, support the theme of social mobility as a goal?