

Holly Chard, *Mainstream Maverick: John Hughes and the New Hollywood Cinema*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2020, 284 pp.

Timothy Shary and Frances Smith (eds), *Refocus: The Films of John Hughes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021, 296 pp.

In a 2018 interview about her teen film *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2019), Desiree Akhavan describes reading the source novel and seeing it as ‘a perfect vehicle for a teen comedy in the vein of John Hughes’.¹ The teen films written and/or directed by Hughes: *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), provide the key reference point for Hollywood teen film as we understand it today. Following the cultivation of his image as the auteur of teen film between 1984-1987 Hughes shifted focus and went on to write, direct and produce modestly budgeted, cross-generational family films. The most successful of which, *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990), made for \$18, 000, 000, grossed a domestic box office of \$285, 761, 243.² Hughes wrote more than thirty films, produced over twenty and directed eight. As Elissa Nelson explains in her exploration of Hughes as an auteur, by 1994 he was the most credited and most bankable scriptwriter in Hollywood (Shary and Smith, p. 34). Akhavan’s reference to Hughes, quoted above, is indicative of the filmmaker’s enduring influence (especially on teen film). The *Miseducation of Cameron Post* includes some of the key Hughesian tropes of teen film: White, middle-class suburbia, prom, make-up and formal wear, classrooms, teenagers getting high and making out, and as Akhavan describes: the realisation that, ‘none of the adults know what they’re doing’.³ In most other respects however, *Miseducation* is the anti-Hughes teen film, or to put it another way: it is the teen film I wish Hughes had made in the 1980s. It’s a film that makes up for, what Molly Ringwald (star and muse of Hughes teen films) calls Hughes’s ‘blind spots’.⁴ Hughes’s films are variously racist, sexist, disablist, homophobic, and at their heart aim to reinforce the supposed “normalcy” of White, heterosexual, middle-class identity via Othering. As responses to the Amber Heard/Johnny Depp defamation trial make the backlash against the more open discussions and acknowledgments of the sexual violence, exploitation and structural inequalities that underpin the Hollywood industry palpable, unpacking and unpicking the influence and relevance of John Hughes speaks to how we might negotiate with hindsight. In her 2018 piece for *The New Yorker* ‘What About *The Breakfast Club*? Revisiting the movies of My Youth in the Age of #MeToo’ Ringwald asks, ‘How are we meant to feel about art that we both love and oppose?’. In engaging with the past, she points out, we can ‘properly gauge how far we have come, and how far we still have to go.’⁵

¹ Kate Erbland, ‘The Miseducation of Cameron Post: Desiree Akhavan on the Spinless American Film Industry and Its Fear of Female Sexuality’, *IndieWire*, (August 10 2018).

² Box Office Mojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr2254131717/> [accessed 15 June 2022].

³ Kate Erbland, ‘The Miseducation of Cameron Post: Desiree Akhavan on the Spinless American Film Industry and Its Fear of Female Sexuality’, *IndieWire*, (August 10 2018).

⁴ Molly Ringwald, ‘What About *the Breakfast Club*? Revisiting the movies of my youth in the age of #MeToo’, *The New Yorker*, (April 6 2018).

⁵ *Ibid.*

This review explores two recent publications which start to think through Hughes in hindsight: Holly Chard's monograph *Mainstream Maverick: John Hughes and the New Hollywood Cinema* and Timothy Shary and Frances Smith's edited collection *Refocus: The Films of John Hughes*. Neither provide a 'catalogue of chastisement' (Chard, p.11) but instead try to navigate the contradictions Hughes presents as a filmmaker that is conversely: sensitive but lewd, an auteur but of commercial entertainment, the voice of youth but conservative, a loyal Chicagoan and a Hollywood yuppie, emblematic of Hollywood filmmaking but independent, a musical tastemaker and cynically exploitative of music fandom, distinctive but generic, his films are often ideologically unacceptable but enjoyable. Both books work hard to understand these contradictions.

Focusing on Hughes work between 1984-1994 Holly Chard's meticulously researched monograph is structured chronologically by chapters that focus alternately on Hughes navigation of the industrial landscape of the period and the complexities of the ideologies that underpin his films. As Chard makes clear, mapping out Hughes career gives us access to an industrially and culturally significant filmmaker but her book also provides illustrative insights into the operations and priorities of the American film industry in the New Hollywood era. Hughes path to filmmaking was unconventional. He began his career in advertising, then wrote for 'National Lampoon magazine', before moving into film. Chard attributes his history in advertising and his strong commercial instincts as the key to his success in a new Hollywood, one made up of executives not moguls (p.66) who saw the value of ancillary markets. Chard details, for example, how during his teen film phase Hughes knew how to exploit mall culture. In particular his incorporation of new music in these films, ideal for MTV and the movie soundtrack, was seen as cutting edge *and* a canny marketing tool. Hughes refuted the idea that his use of music was cynically motivated but his soundtracks and videos were part of well-designed high concept marketing strategies nonetheless (p. 78).

Similarly, Chard explores some of the ideological complexities and contradictions of his films. Something referenced consistently about Hughes is that he took teenagers seriously (both as characters in his films and as a niche market) and that he shifted the focus of teen films to girls and geeks. Bucking the trend of the genre of one-dimensional female characters that simply exist to be stalked, harassed and voyeurised, in films such as *Porky's* (Clark, 1981), Hughes provided a relatively novel representation of girlhood for the time. However, as Chard, Shary and Smith make clear, elements of lewd voyeurism and harassment remain in Hughes work and, as Chard explains, there is still a passivity to his female protagonists, who promote a 'restrained type of female sexuality based on romance' (p. 51).

Chard's expertise extends beyond this monograph and she provides a chapter for the edited collection *The Films of John Hughes*, which is part of the Edinburgh University Press *Refocus* series on neglected American directors. Shary and Smith's book opens with a quote from the Ringwald article referenced above: 'It's hard for me to understand how John [Hughes] was able to write with so much sensitivity, and also have such a glaring blind spot' (p. 1). Hughes used racism, sexism and sexual assault in his films for comic effect. As Shary and Smith point out, this went unreferenced by critics at the time *and* 'his work still endures' (p. 3). The collection brings together chapters that explore Hughes work from various

perspectives that acknowledge these complexities and try to understand what makes his work distinctive. The volume is organised into four sections dedicated to Hughes in the industry, reconsidering youth, family and fatherhood, and contested identities. Elissa Nelson's auteur study opens the volume and makes a statement that underpins the rest of the collection: 'The films are not sacrosanct; we can and do criticize them even if we like them. They are also not evil incarnate, watching and enjoying them does not mean viewers are racist, misogynist, or are in ideological alignment with the complete text.' (p. 39) Yannis Tzioumakis's chapter "'Becoming John Hughes": Regional Production, Hyphenate Filmmaking, and Independence within Hollywood' details Hughes unconventional route into and fight for independence within Hollywood, not to create 'idiosyncratic films at the margins' (p. 44) but as Chard also calls it, as a mainstream maverick making commercial fare. Starting the collection with these two chapters highlights the contradictions of Hughes and his work.

The volume is bookended by a focus on Hughes's teen films and the chapters in 'Contested Identities' rethink elements of these films that have previously been taken for granted. As Shary and Smith point out, the final chapters 'echo Molly Ringwald's reconsideration of her work with Hughes' (p. 199) and in doing so they evaluate the representation of masculinity, class and race in Hughes's teen films and within the context of 1980s America. Frances Smith's chapter 'the Unbearable Whiteness of Being in a John Hughes movie' examines the filmmaker's erasure of BAME characters and his construction of Whiteness. Smith points out that scholarship on Hughes and teen film in general, including her own, often mirrors this erasure by acknowledging that 'many Hollywood teen movies possess complicated racial politics' before moving on (p. 239). In this chapter, instead, Smith utilises Richard Dyer's work on race as a means to examine Hughes construction of middle-class youth that largely excludes BAME characters, 'policing the boundaries of Whiteness' (p. 246) and, in places, uses overt racial stereotyping for comic effect. In this undertaking Smith draws attention to the need to continually reassess and provides a way, as both books do, of thinking through hindsight. As Smith points out 'the contemporary film and television industries must still reckon with these matters' (p. 247). As must contemporary scholars. As an academic that has committed the "acknowledge and move on" trope in my own work on teen film it is obvious that dedication to continued reassessment is imperative.

Both books make absolutely clear the problems and contradictions with John Hughes and his work and demonstrate that nevertheless his films have 'become part of the fabric of American popular culture' (Chard, p. 232). In doing so they offer a jumping off point to explore further the pleasures of these films. To answer the contradiction of why we sometimes enjoy things we don't necessarily agree with. In the chapter "'Life moves pretty fast": Mobility, Power, and Aesthetics in John Hughes's Teen Films' Christina G. Petersen discusses some of the ways in which *The Breakfast Club* presents 'youth as a feeling of play' (p. 94) through various aspects of dance and framing. In 'Brand Name Vision: Props in the films of John Hughes' Leah R. Shafer explores the ways that his films offer affective connections to branded items (p. 146), generating pleasure through commodity fetishism. These chapters offer some interesting ways of starting to think about how Hughes's films are designed to generate specific affective pleasures as a means to help explain why these contradictory films have endured.