

What Makes A Teen Classic?

Jason Woloski

When we hear the term “classic movie,” we usually think of something old, probably in black-and-white, which plays very late at night on television. *Citizen Kane* (1941) comes to mind. *Casablanca* (1942) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) also come to mind, the latter of which is not only a classic movie, but a movie that has become an annual fixture on televisions every holiday season. In comparison, when we think of the typical “teen movie,” it usually means something that’s fluffy and disposable, or entertaining for how scary, funny, or exciting it was at the time of watching it, but rarely do we associate “teen movies” and “classic movies” in the same breath.

Of course, there are teen movies that have stood the test of time while remaining classic films, regardless of their being associated with the teen film genre. *Rebel Without a Cause* was released in 1955, stars the late James Dean, and has simultaneously become a classic film and a classic teen film over the past fifty years. In many ways, *Rebel...* defined what it meant to be a teenager on the movie screen, with Dean’s Jim Stark character struggling with peer pressure, sexual angst, parental expectations, and feelings of not being taken seriously, mixed with feelings of being forced to grow up before his time. *Rebel...* happily exists as an example of a great teen film and a great film in

general, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

The more common approach by film critics and scholars, unfortunately, is to dismiss the seriousness of teen films outright. After all, if a film is titled *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (2000) or *Fast Times at Ridgement High* (1983), it’s not likely playing at the local art cinema, right? Conversely, a number of movies are released each year featuring teenage protagonists, such as Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), which would never be considered teen movies, because they are just too serious and adult in tone. Conversely, teen films as a genre are not generally associated with adult themes and content. In fact, teen films tend not to want to focus on adult issues, choosing to focus instead on specifically teenage-related issues, with the prospect of capturing teenagers’ hopes, dreams, and anxieties on film, while intentionally appealing to a largely teenage audience.

So far, a number of generalizations have been made about teen films, but we are learning a valuable lesson: it’s hard to establish a new canon of films when one doesn’t already exist. In case you are wondering, a canon is a group of works that are considered to represent the highest quality of a particular art form, such as writing,

music, or filmmaking. Canons can also exist for specific types of work within an art form. For instance, we are only focusing on establishing a canon relating to teens and film. Canons are always negotiable, are always changing, and very few hard and fast rules exist when creating a canon.

The following section offers a few ideas about what makes a movie not just a teen film, but a classic teen film. Of course, these “rules” are open to others’ opinions, and it may be a good idea to discuss whether these four rules for establishing a teen film canon make sense.

Rule 1: A CANONICAL TEEN FILM MUST CAPTURE THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME IN WHICH IT IS SET.

For example, not only is *American Graffiti* (1973) a film about California teenagers of the early 1960s, but it captures teenagers’ interests in racing cars, anxieties about the Vietnam War, and the importance of emerging music radio stations at the time.

Rule 2: A CANONICAL TEEN FILM MUST BE POPULAR. Many great films are popular straight out of the gate, but then lose steam with the passage of time. Other films are barely heard of upon release in theatres, but then gather a cult following years later. For the purpose of this canon, a film must either have a lasting resonance which makes it speak to teenagers generation

after generation, or it must have been wildly popular upon initial release, while remaining a unique curiosity in the history of teen movies to this day. In some cases, only time will tell if a recent movie’s initial popularity lasts. Meanwhile, a film such as *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965) was extremely popular at the time of its release, but is no longer popular today. That said, *Beach Blanket Bingo* remains a one-of-a-kind example of musical beach party movies, and so it fulfills the qualification of this rule. In short, if a film has never been popular or of interest to teenagers of any generation, the film does not deserve to be canonized.

Rule 3: A CANONICAL TEEN FILM MUST INFLUENCE POPULAR CULTURE.

Relevant teen movies can not exist in a vacuum. If a teen movie appeals to teenagers for one weekend at the box office, but is forgotten soon after, it is not a classic. Love them or hate them, when you mention films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), people know what you are talking about. These films are referenced in other films, their soundtracks are associated with scenes from the films, and the actors starring in these films built careers which last to this day. Even if one has never seen *Grease* (1978), everyone knows the songs from the film, who stars in it, and knows that a popular 2007 reality series exists, which was built around casting a new Danny and Sandy for a Broadway revival of the musical on which *Grease* was based.



Rule 4: A CANONICAL TEEN FILM MUST ALTER THE DIRECTION AND/OR START A NEW TREND OF TEEN FILMS. No matter how popular a film movement is, there's always one film that starts it all. In the case of teenage rebels on screen, while it is tempting to say James Dean got the ball rolling with *Rebel Without a Cause*, it was actually Marlon Brando who set the template two years earlier as a biker in a leather jacket in 1953's *The Wild One*. Until *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) came along, the idea of nerds hating jocks, and vice versa, was never presented on screen. Since 1984, however, nerds versus jocks is a constant of teen film plots, most recently captured in the ultra-popular *Napoleon Dynamite*, about a group of Idaho nerds battling the tough, mean world around them.

Below is a teen film canon based on these rules. There are twenty-four films on the list, and they've been broken down into "Classic Classics" and "Modern Classics," with '80s Classics getting a separate, rather large category of its own. The reason for so much focus on the 1980s is because it was a particularly rich decade for teen films, with filmmaker John Hughes working at his peak, and several films standing the test of time to this day as popular and influential teen flicks. As already stated, this canon is open for debate. As an exercise, why not see where the four rules of creating a canon do and do not apply to the films chosen for this list?

Classic Classics

American Graffiti (1973, dir. by George Lucas)
Beach Blanket Bingo (1965, dir. William Asher)
Carrie (1976, dir. by Brian de Palma)
Grease (1978, dir. by Randal Kleiser)
Rebel Without a Cause (1955, dir. by Nicholas Ray)
The Wild One (1953, dir. by Laszlo Benedek)

'80s Classics

The Breakfast Club (1985, dir. by John Hughes)
Dirty Dancing (1987, dir. Emile Ardolino)
Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982, dir. by Amy Heckerling)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986, dir. by John Hughes)
Footloose (1984, dir. by Herbert Ross)
Heathers (1989, dir. by Michael Lehmann)
License to Drive (1988, dir. by Greg Beeman)
The Outsiders (1983, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola)
Revenge of the Nerds (1984, dir. by Jeff Kanew)
Say Anything... (1989, dir. by Cameron Crowe)
Stand By Me (1986, dir. by Rob Reiner)
Teen Wolf (1985, dir. by Rod Daniel)

Modern Classics

American Pie (1999, dir. by Paul and Chris Weitz)
Bring It On (2000, dir. by Peyton Reed)
Clueless (1995, dir. by Amy Heckerling)
Dazed and Confused (1993, dir. By Richard Linklater)
Mean Girls (2004, dir. by Mark Waters)
Napoleon Dynamite (2004, dir. by Jared Hess)