

This paper jumps from personal narrative to historical analysis to media analysis while exploring the role of movies on teenage ideas of conformity and individuality. I will explore the punk movement and my own experience as a way to analyze the accuracy of the portrayal of teenage conformity and recklessness within these films. How does media romanticize individuality? How can the want for individualism lead to conformity?

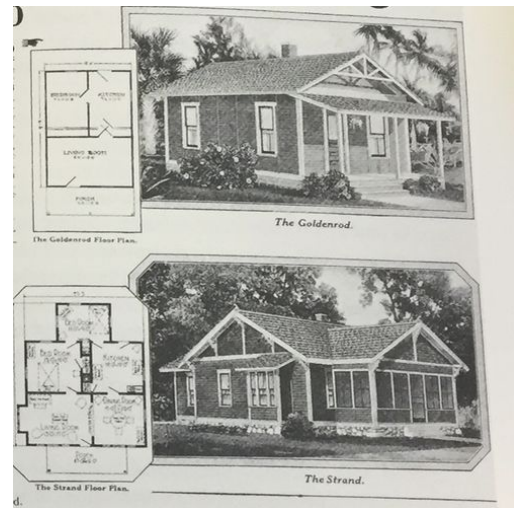
“Freedom is a state of mind - not freedom from something but a sense of freedom, a freedom to doubt and question everything and therefore so intense, active and vigorous that it throws away every form of dependence, slavery, conformity and acceptance. Such freedom implies being completely alone.”

-J Krishnamurti, Freedom from the Known

Fifteen minute snack recess. The cloak room, or was is coat room? smells of forgotten cheese sticks in Dora backpacks and crushed Ritz crackers. Giggling, the two of you skip, crawl, bounce, hand in hand to your bags. "You guys are so weird." your shaggy haired crush spits at you two. He had a mole on his cheek and had a shark tooth necklace. You freeze. She looks up at you. "My sister says weird is good."you reply. "Yeah." she responds, "Weird is good. We're weird. Weeeeirddd." giggling even more, you chant "We're weird! We're weird!" the double yours blurring together as you run out to the yard.

Age 8: Being a "girly girl" was no longer "in". Basketball shoes, shorts and a button down was the uniform of the masses gathered on the playground. But soon enough, basketball shoes sprout holes and it's too cold for shorts. You come home from school and try on your mom's heels and put on the clothes you reserve only for Thanksgiving or dinners at Garrabaldi's. Pink is your favorite color, but you say its green and blue.

The suburbs, satellite towns to the hustle and bustle of the cities that they surround, are often characterized by their dull, homogeneous physical appearance: split level houses, crisp white and tan paint jobs and shingled roofs. Cookie cutter houses that at one point you could order in a Sears catalog and set up yourself. You can walk down the block and see ten other houses identical to yours.¹ In a New York Times article, William L. Hamilton explores the effects of suburban landscapes on teenagers. For teens, "the standard of houses is high, but the standard of community isn't." He argues that the physical layout of suburbs were unhealthy and unthoughtful for teenagers to grow up in due to the emphasis on "control", capitalism, and commercialism. They weren't "places for free expression or hanging out." Teens are forced to express themselves in other ways, they're "basically an unseen population until they pierce their noses."² Because of this lack of opportunity for expression, it's no surprise that these neighborhoods are overwhelmingly the setting for countless coming of age, high school dramatized films, usually following the story of a highschooler ditching their conformist peers in search of their own identity. Within these movies, the "us versus the world" mentality is central.



Michael Lehmann's 1989 *Heathers* is a film set in suburban Ohio. The film follows the story of highschooler Veronica as she navigates being a part of the popular clique and conforming, or joining her boyfriend J.D., a James Dean archetype, and changing the order of the

¹Abid, Ayesha. "Sears Is Fading, But Memories Of Its Mail-Order Homes Endure." *NPR*, NPR, 20 Oct. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/10/20/657770791/sears-is-fading-but-memories-of-its-mail-order-homes-endure.

²Hamilton, William L. "How Suburban Design Is Failing Teen-Agers." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 May 1999, www.nytimes.com/1999/05/06/garden/how-suburban-design-is-failing-teen-agers.html?auth=login-email&login=email&pagewanted=all%3A.

school. The Heathers are a clear representation of conformity. They all dress in a similar fashion, have the same name, and encourage Veronica to join them in their clique of conformity. J.D. and Veronica end up killing the ringleader of the Heathers and slowly, Veronica sees that J.D. is killing all the students he doesn't like.³ While in the beginning, Veronica believes that she is being independent and breaking from conformity, this path leads her to isolation and destruction. *Heathers* is a cautionary tale of following the nonlinear path to "independence" and freeing oneself from conformity only to find oneself in another form of conformity and destruction. Media is obsessed with the "coming of age" storyline portrayed in thousands of films since 1942 with Disney's *Bambi*. The main audience watching these movies are teens, meaning that they are the most vulnerable group susceptible to the lessons these movies show. When we as viewers see people like us, it makes us feel heard and then we will follow the lessons they show us. As coming to age movies have evolved, they have strayed from the innocent *Bambi* storyline of merely a child growing up in a scary world, to a child growing up against a less scary, more eerily conformist world that they are trying to rebel against. In *Heathers*, young viewers misread the portrayal of the "us versus them", coming of age mentality and take it as their reality, implementing this mindset in their own lives, creating barriers between themselves and their peers.

Age 13: you think no one understands you. Math class makes you anxious, you cheat on a negatives quiz on your birthday. You start wearing black leggings and black and white graphic t-shirts from Target with your sisters red flannel on top. Your best friend who you resent quietly for being blonde tells you she's stopped listening to One Direction, not thinking you say "Thank god, maybe you can start listening to real music." Secretly you like One Direction and Shawn Mendes but in public you listen to Twenty One Pilots and Arctic Monkeys. You look down at people still wearing the same colorful palette they have been for years. You're a bitch.

Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* traces the story of a suburban family ruined by the confines of the characteristics of a nuclear family. The story focuses on Lester, the father of the family who too, struggles with the conformity within his neighborhood. His daughter Jane's best friend, Angela, is filled with resentments to the boringness of conformity saying, "I don't think there's anything worse than being ordinary" to Jane in conversation. While Angela is afraid of being ordinary, she also looks down upon not being ordinary, calling Jane's boyfriend a "freak". In response, Jane says, "We'll always be freaks because we'll never be like other people and you'll never be a freak because you're just too perfect." Jane is proud to be a freak, or maybe just proud not to be ordinary and to "never be like other people."⁴ The couple's yearning for individuality creates divisions between friends as Jane places herself above Angela for believing she's found her individuality, later calling Angela "boring" and ordinary" and that she "knows it" too. Angela feels uncomfortable in herself so she seeks out approval from Jane's dad, a man she has a sexual relationship with, asking, "You don't think I'm ordinary?" Lester responds, "You couldn't be ordinary if you tried." and Angela repeats, "I don't think there's anything worse than being ordinary." The fear of being ordinary is overwhelming and taking over Angela's life. *American Beauty* creates a stigma around being ordinary and romanticizes being a "freak" or being different through painting a picture of a happy couple content in their "difference". In

³ Michael Lehmann, *Heathers* 1989

⁴Sam Mendes, *American Beauty* 1999

reality, they only have each other and have isolated themselves so that they plot about running away together and therefore are not the independent individuals that they claim to be.

Age 14: you're the first person in your class to wear jeans. You take pictures of your latte art and choke down coffee when really you just want a mocha like your friends get. You only post pictures of people who dress like you. Turtle necks, jeans converse. You're a bitch. Not an obvious one, not in your words, but in your thoughts. You're a bitch.

Anger and the want for self expression and individuality in it of itself is not inherently bad, in fact, rebellion is a healthy and normal thing for teens to do. For example, when the manager of a punk club, "Club 88" was asked why he thinks punks dance so violently he responded, "It's an energy outlet, they're really nice kids, they just want to be different. It's a release from their daily tensions. In our day, we just ate Goldfish."⁵As he reflected, for punks, their music and dancing was a way to rebel. However, the issue with *American Beauty* is that it shows its young viewers that the answer to feeling lost or as though their peers don't understand them is to run away and find people who are more like you. *American Beauty* offers the critique with no real solution for their viewers, leaving viewers with only the movie as context for a solution which in this case is running off with your psychopathic stalker boyfriend. While they don't offer a real solution, in many ways this depiction is similar to the realities of many teens trying to find a quick fix to their problems and feelings of disarray, so however bad of a message it sends to teens, the media does have an accurate depiction. In *The Decline of Western Civilization*, an interviewer asked a punk musician why he had such an eccentric hairstyle and he responded, "Because I'm searching...Maybe if I set myself aside and made myself different, I'd find [what I'm searching for]."

Age 17: You cut your hair and dye it a rotating palette of colors. You walk around the streets of Napa met with stares and comments which you aren't sure if they're backhanded. You are followed and chased and you can't help but wonder if it's your hair which makes you a target. But maybe that's just your ego talking. You judge your peers who don't dress the same as you. The people around you, the people you call friends, all dress and act like you. You're conforming to an art school archetype, yet your individuality within the town of Napa makes you feel unsafe. Conformity is safe but only in context.

Gummo is a drama from 1997 which takes place in a suburb of Ohio in the wake of a tornado. The scenery is not your typical suburban upper middle class town as depicted in *Heathers* and *American Beauty*, but still, the themes of individuality and escaping conformity ring true. The film follows a group of teenagers navigating competition, sex and the recklessness that comes with being young. Throughout the movie, killing and abusing cats is a cruel way two boys feel powerful and different within their community. The boys find out that another person had been killing cats by placing poison next to the garbage cans while they had been whipping them to death. The boys feel a sense of competition as they thought they had been individuals killing cats, but really they are among a group of reckless teens committing the same acts of evil, just taking a different route. This competition, stemming from a fear of conformity and not being

⁵ Penelope Spheeris, *Decline of Western Civilization* 1981

different, leads them to break into the boy's house and kill his grandmother.⁶ Like Heathers, the want to be different and break conformity led these teenagers to murder. While both movies are an incredibly dramatized depiction of the dangers of constantly searching for individuality and putting barriers between oneself and others, the central message of not fearing conformity is still ever present. This is an underlying message however and for young viewers it can shape their perception of conformity as fitting in and to be an individual you must isolate yourself from the masses. Yet again, in *Gummo*, the movie demonizes nonconformists, angry rebels, yet also makes this demonization accessible to young viewers, allowing the image of a "rebel" inflicting violence to be the face of nonconformity. The critique of seemingly unbacked rebellion is a valid one, especially when violence has been a byproduct of it, but it also further stigmatizes anger among teens. Even though anger is crucial to maintaining a healthy culture, now more than ever teenagers today *must* be angry and "rebel" in order to save the world from mass extinction due to the climate crisis. During the punk movement, punks were angry about similar things, one said, "It's just like folk music but instead of acoustic guitar its electric. We're yelling about the same things. About how their air is poisoned. The air in utopia *gestures to the skyline behind him* is poisoned. The final joke."

With punk music came a certain attitude/persona and look. For punks, fashion was an incredibly important part of their label and culture. It was a way to "make a statement, to get someone's attention. It cried, "Ask me what I think!" One teenage punk reflected in an interview for Penelope Spheeris' *The Decline of Western Civilization*, "I like making a spectacle of myself."⁷ While the punk community largely looked similar, with this came judgements and fears of posers. They wanted their community to be people who wholehearted believed in the guidelines if you will, of punk culture including a "repudiation of corporate America's feel-good, 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' culture" and its efforts "to make everyone stupid".⁸ With this came a fear of posers within the community, those who had "convertible haircuts" that could be worn spiked up in punk style at a concert and then slicked back down for work on Monday". So, while the very basis of punk culture was to not conform, within their group they also forced people out/reprimanded those who didn't conform to their certain archetype of nonconformity. Herein lies the contradiction of conformity, when we choose to break off from the conformity of popular culture, a byproduct of this is another culture of conformity simply in a different outfit. A teenage punk reflected in an interview for *Decline of Western Civilization*, "At one point maybe I was considered different, but now I'm at a comfortable lifestyle and I came to be myself."⁹ To be a part of punk culture it "required a genuine bent for difference," a genuine feeling of "us versus them", with them being corporate America and those who conform. Punks were "linked by knowing [they] were not alone in [their] outrage and refusal to conform and accept the status quo".

⁶ Harmony Korine, *Gummo* 1997

⁷ Penelope Spheeris, *Decline of Western Civilization* 1981

⁸ <https://academic.mu.edu/meissnerd/punk.html>

⁹ Penelope Spheeris, *Decline of Western Civilization* 1981

“If you say you’re free from something, it is a reaction which will then become another reaction which will bring about another conformity, another form of domination. In this way you can have a chain of reactions and accept each reaction as freedom. But it is not freedom; it is merely a continuity of a modified past which the mind clings to. The youth of today, like all youth, are in revolt against society, and that is a good thing in itself, but revolt is not freedom because when you revolt it is a reaction and that reaction sets up its own pattern and you get caught in that pattern. You think it is something new. It is not; it is the old in a different mould. Any social or political revolt will inevitably revert to the good old bourgeois mentality.”

-J Krishnamurti, Freedom from the Known

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