

Reagan's bastard children: the lost teens of 1980s American indie films

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April 29, 2018

Away from the ersatz, self-satisfied rebelliousness of Reaganite pop teen movies, a more independent strain of US cinema scratched at the darkness on the edge of mainstream adult society. Christina Newland revisits the orphans of the American Dream.

The monoculture of the 1980s was writ large on American cinema of the decade. From [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#)'s muscle-rippling actioners to [John Hughes](#)'s adolescent confections, bombastic, generally upbeat films characterised the decade of the yuppie. In high school, whether you were a goth or a punk, a stoner or a princess, films like [The Breakfast Club](#) or [Say Anything...](#) resolved themselves with the arrogance only privilege can buy: freedom to be yourself, a spirit of belonging and a sense that things will work out fine.

The Sight & Sound Deep Focus season [Lost in America: The Other Side of Reagan's 80s](#) runs 1-30 May 2018 at the BFI Southbank, London, and is the cover feature of our June 2018 issue.

When it came to the quintessential 80s teenager, from [Ferris Bueller](#) to [Molly Ringwald](#), personality was padded by upper-middle-class comfort, whiteness, and the ability to purchase an identity for the price of a faddish outfit or a stylish car. Rebellious only by a matter of degrees, the teens of mainstream American movies in the 80s tended to be easily laced back into the status quo – generally speaking, their alienation was never deeply-felt enough to really leave a mark. With a few notable exceptions ([Heathers](#) was a razor-blade in the candy apple of American teen films) the teenage suburbs of the 1980s were a pretty safe place to be.

But in the shadows of all that sunny market-driven optimism and nostalgia for tradition that the Reagan era encouraged, the American independent film flourished with an altogether darker view of adolescence. In the midst of striking income inequality, the AIDS epidemic and soaring crime rates, filmmakers with a more jaundiced eye would offer an alternative perspective. [Dennis Hopper](#), [David Lynch](#), [Penelope Spheeris](#), [Joyce Chopra](#) and the like would reconsider the contours of American youth and shine a revealing light on the troubles, poverty and generational conflict within.

In [River's Edge](#) (1986) – now best-known as the outlier cult film that starred a fledgling [Keanu Reeves](#) – a gang of misanthropic, self-absorbed teenagers discover one of their friends has murdered another, and flock to stare at the girl's prone, naked corpse. The teens inhabit rough overgrown patches of exurban land, with parents unable to control

them or drawn to the teat of substance abuse. Their misguided loyalty to one another keeps them from going to the police, but it's their empty moral gestures that are so surprising; they seem to be acting out a pantomime of human reactions. The only adult the teens seem to put trust in is the reclusive, unstable Feck (Dennis Hopper), a murderous drug dealer. By the conclusion, the film's purview seems to go beyond cynical and reach the apocalyptic.

Parents are similarly useless in Hopper's own low-budget, bleak [Out of the Blue](#) (1981). [Linda Manz](#) plays 15-year-old Cebe, a poor and neglected teen obsessed with the punk movement. Her mother is a junkie and her father (played by Hopper himself) a sexually abusive jailbird. Cebe dons a leather jacket and spits "Disco sucks! Kill all hippies!" at anyone who'll listen, devoting herself to a subculture that speaks to her anger and alienation. In a film by Hopper – the symbol of 60s counterculture film writ large – it's a pointed choice. Cebe's parents are flower-child burnouts, hamstrung by addiction and poverty. The curdled idealism of the hippie era has done nothing to provide a better way of life for an outsider like Cebe, who still cannot find a place in the world.

The generation gap is literalised in Sidney Lumet's [Running on Empty](#) (1988), making [River Phoenix](#)'s parents ([Judd Hirsch](#) and [Christine Lahti](#)) actual counterculture radicals à la The Weathermen Underground. The sins of the parents are inflicted on the children in the most apparent ways here, since the secretive family are on the run for domestic terrorism charges.

As one might expect from Lumet, proceedings are less tawdry than in the aforementioned films – there's no lurid sex or drug abuse to hammer the point home. The maladjusted 18-year-old in question is a moody, intelligent musical talent who dreams of attending Juilliard, but is scuppered by the fugitive status of his family. Lumet probes the themes of generational conflict with a mild and emotional approach, avoiding recrimination while acknowledging that the sweep of 60s and 70s radicalism seems to have left some parents ill-suited to raising children. Shouldn't this promising teenager be allowed to fulfil his bourgeois potential as a successful musician, without the burdens of his bohemian parents? It's a touching film with tenderness for all involved, but its yearning for ordinariness and comfort still places it squarely on the aspirational side of Reagan's America.

Youths of the 60s and 70s – with their push for civil rights and anti-war protests – seemed to present a genuine threat to the balance of society and an active challenge to their parents' generation. By the 80s, baby boomers are anaesthetised or impotent, while the teens present no such danger to the establishment. Not unintentionally, [Back to the Future](#)'s Marty McFly and his fellows had more in common with depictions of the 50s American teen – lightweight malaise, comfortable upbringings, material comforts – than with the socially and politically-engaged youths of their parents' generation. How telling that

Back to the Future's dream of a perfect ending is one in which Marty's siblings and parents are successful, well-dressed yuppies.

If hippiedom and its utopian ideals are seen to have soured, punk is not often offered as a corrective force. In *Out of the Blue*, Cebe's tough posturing cannot make up for her family's neglect. She interprets the nihilistic punk ethos with such childlike seriousness that she is fated to self-destruct. With no guidance, what can we expect? Amidst their violence and seeming amorality, there's a certain amount of cautionary judgement in the films from this era.

Youth subculture and punk, especially, became a cornerstone of several independent films of the era. Penelope Spheeris became one of the key chroniclers of the West Coast punk scene in a series of films including [The Decline of Western Civilisation](#) (1981) and [Suburbia](#) (1984). While the former was a documentary, the latter was written by Spheeris, realistically layering her own various encounters and observances into a fictional drama.

The result is an anecdotal film about a group of damaged teenage runaways who squat in an abandoned house together. As in *Out of the Blue*, *Suburbia* sees punk as a refuge for the abused and dispossessed. Although Spheeris's view of the subculture is slightly warmer than Hopper's, it's still only by a matter of degrees – it's a rough and tumble, cockroach-infested life, peopled by kids who would rather risk being eaten by feral dogs and arrested for squatting than to live with a corruptible older generation.

On his spare, desolate 1982 album *Nebraska*, Bruce Springsteen sings, "Now I been lookin' for a job but it's hard to find / Down here it's just winners and losers and don't get caught on the wrong side of that line."

If there's a coda to the mainstream teen films of the decade, it's that to be a 'loser' is the ultimate shame. But in *River's Edge*, *Suburbia* or *Out of the Blue*, losers are the central focus. They are born into and trapped on the 'wrong side of that line', and thus swept into the margins of the decade's depictions.

This is taken to its fullest extension in the harrowing documentary film [Streetwise](#) (1984), where real families-in-breakdown are the focus. [Martin Bell](#) followed the heartbreaking stories of runaways on the streets of Seattle, particularly that of 'Tiny', a child prostitute whose dipsomaniac mother condones her daughter's line of work. Nothing could make the desperation and inequality of Reagan's America clearer, and Bell's film dragged the marginalised into the light in a sensitive – if aestheticised – manner. Still, this is plaintive, raw filmmaking. It proved highly influential to the next generation of independents, particularly [Larry Clark](#) and [Harmony Korine](#).

This reality stands in stark contrast to the minor dramas of Hollywood cinema. Judd Nelson, the paper champion of 80s teen rebels, would be anathema to the frequently dangerous teenagers of the decade's indie films. Their playbook of foul-mouthed vandals,

leather-jacketed tearaways hooked on amphetamines, androgynous punk girls and homicidal teen heartthrobs are too far removed from the mainstream to care about being reconciled to it.

When these portrayals are held up beside the pastel-hued, antiseptic rebellion of the John Hughes teen, the result is unsettling. Where [Pretty in Pink](#) or Ferris Bueller's Day Off once seemed innocuous and likeable, they now seem hopelessly gauche. Documentarian Martin Bell has an anecdote that sums it up nicely. In 1984, as he left a busy Seattle screening of *Streetwise*, he overheard a teenager's reaction to the film: "I want to hit someone, but I don't know who."