

# AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980S

## Topic Five: Yuppie Cinema

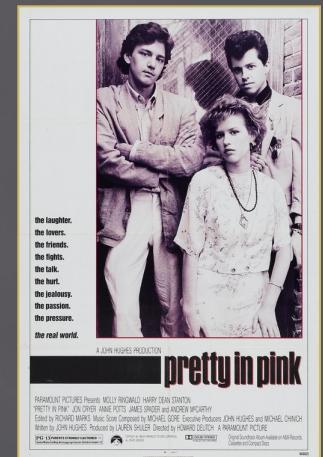
Dr. Richard Nowell  
Department of Film Studies & Audiovisual Culture,  
Masaryk University



# Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

1. The Figure of the Yuppie
2. Yuppies-in-Peril
3. Die Yuppie Scum





# **Hollywood and Social Types**

Newly emergent social types have long since provided culture industries like Hollywood with novel content to reinvigorate formats

Sometimes they have even inspired sufficient confidence to have films built around them, oftentimes aimed at audience identifying this way

Examples have famously included the Hollywood hippies of the 1960s, Gen-X slackers of the 1990s, and LGBTQ+ folks of recent times

Such conduct reminds us these groups are often nurtured – invented even – by industries to create new market niches to target products at

Such conduct was pronounced in the 1980s, as marketers tirelessly worked to create groups as figures of consumer aspiration and profit

# **“Because we are Living in a Material World”**

Above all other social trends, 1980s America is associated with a celebration of wealth, consumption, and materialism

As a hierarchical pyramidal system, capitalism may ensure that the minority posses the majority of financial resources

Still, 1980s popular media is typically remembered for output that celebrated the winners in this neoliberal dog-fight

Such depictions spanned media, from TV docuseries and sitcoms, to pop and rock, to fashion and films, even wrestling!

As if often true, a distillation of social, political, and media history is exemplified by a social-type: here, the Yuppie



Before Austin explores some of their cinematic manifestations, he offers a helpful overview of what Yuppies were...

## 1. What was the Yuppie?

# The Yuppie 1.0: White Collar 30-Somethings

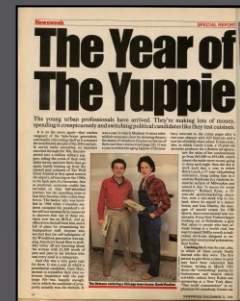
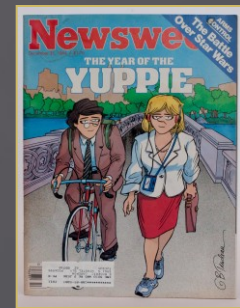
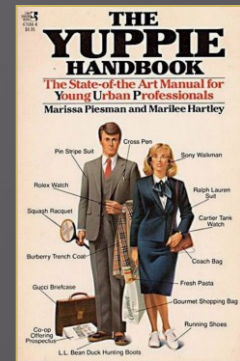
The Yuppie was a newly coined social type that reflected the economic success and lifestyle choices of some baby-boomers

They were imagined as middle-class hippies grown up, having abandoned their progressive political idealism of the 1960s

Having lived through the me-decade therapy culture of the 1970s, they had adopted a self-serving financial pragmatism

This supposed shift in values had generated a large number of thirty-somethings enjoying visible economic upward mobility

As well paid workers or entrepreneurs, they were imagined to commute from suburbs to lucrative urban service sector roles



Austin examines the ways Yuppies were placed in peril in a series of Hollywood thrillers in the 1980s (and early 1990s)

2. What were the yuppie nightmare films?



# Celluloid Yuppy Stress Dreams

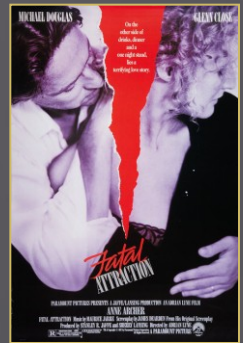
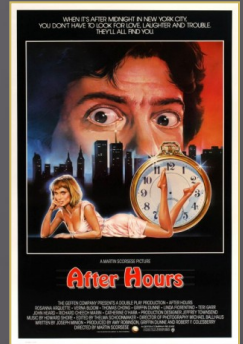
Austin suggests that these films came close to scary movies due to their thematizing Yuppy concerns for Yuppie audiences

He argues the films represented expressionistic “Mindscapes” visualizing these anxieties much like waking stress dreams

Security, predictability, and the material rewards of financial success – homes, cars, property – are presented as vulnerable

In this way, the films depicted Yuppie values and lifestyles as a form of normalcy that is jeopardized by external threats

He argues the films are ambivalent about yuppiedom, inviting some viewer-joy at destabilizing yuppies’ ordered worlds





# Hollywood as an Escape From Yuppie Malaise

The film uses a “Mindscape” to showcase the escapist fantasies of a yuppie housewife who yearns for exciting new experiences

It imagines Yuppies as thirty-something suburbanites whose social economic upward mobility has left them alienated

She finds fulfillment by temporarily swapping the security of married suburban life for thrills of urban bohemian decadence

This liminal space is imagined largely through white urban post-punk culture; exoticized here as a playground for the rich

Its dream-like nature links Roberta’s escape with cinema itself, promoting consumption of films over radical lifestyle changes



# An Attractive Media Audience

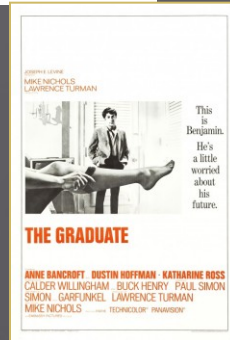
The Yuppie initially represented a commercially appealing way of constructing and targeting movie-watching audiences

As young people these middle-class Americans had saved Hollywood from near-bankruptcy in the late 1960s and 1970s

They had the economic resources for the new domestic media hardware needed to maintain movie-watching into parenthood

They were reachable as audiences who shared the self-serving conservative values as middle-aged Hollywood decision-makers

They promised to maintain the profitability of mid-budget prestige family melodrama that had reached blockbuster levels

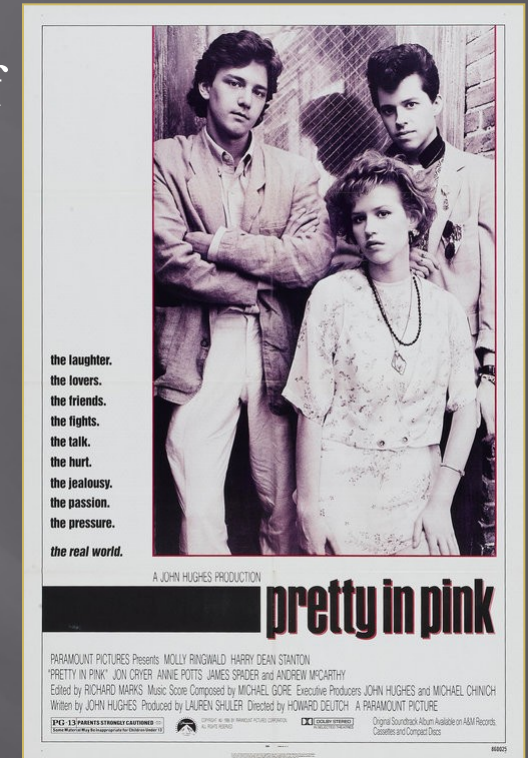




# *Pretty in Pink* (1986)

A fertile arena for criticism of Yuppiedom was the teen film, which offered scathing treatments thereof

1. How does this film depict yuppies?
2. To what extent does it celebrate them?
3. To what extent does it critique them?



# Yuppie's Nightmares to Nightmare Yuppies

This film also competing mindscapes to depict characters coping with their situations, esp. regarding cross-class relations



The rich are cast as narcissistic apparitions who abuse the poor; less real people, more phantoms haunting their subconscious



This film promotes cultural over economic capital, fashioning hip indie bohemia as a retreat from yuppies not their playground



This universe represents an escape into hip youth culture; in much like the film itself is perhaps meant to do for audiences



The ending is empty and ironic; the couple is doomed due to irreconcilable class differences: this is a horror film after all!



# ***The Goldbergs: Season 5 Episode 7***

<https://ww2.m4uhd.tv/watch-tvseries-the-goldbergs-2013-224167.html>





**Or, an example of this broader cultural trend**





# **The Yuppie 2.0: Wealthy Psychopath**

A broader cultural vilification of yuppies as Country Club republicans, incentivized Hollywood to aim yuppie monsters at middle-class viewers

After some commercial success, Yuppie films offering sympathetic depictions of yuppies for this demographic struggled commercially

Yuppie targeting worked for television economics, as this was built less on attracting viewers per se than linking advertisers to affluent viewers

Cinema's reliance on attracting large audiences was undermined by the Yuppie really representing a prominent minority amid economic crises

The yuppie as narcissist enabled the creative industries to insulate their actual middle-class viewers from confronting their own privilege

# Coda: Of American Psychos

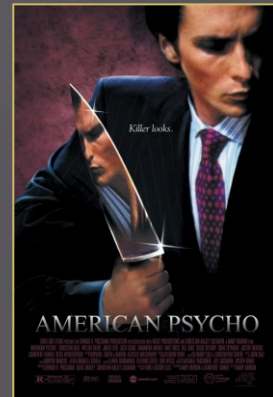
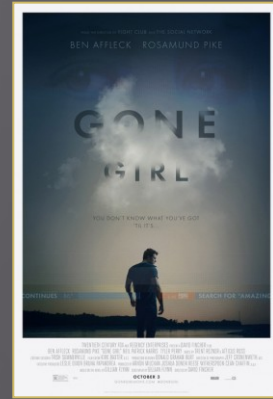
The two variants of Yuppie Cinema pioneered in the 1980s have lived on in American media albeit in quite different ways

Tales of young professionals material lives being placed in jeopardy have continued, albeit shorn of the “yuppie” marker

Perhaps more significantly though, the figure of the Yuppie as monster has remained more prominent thanks to films like ...

*American Psycho* (2000): a satire on 1980s Yuppiedom, in which the protagonist Patrick Bateman is a serial murderer

Crucially, it depicts Bateman as culturally ignorant, thereby distancing Hollywood and its audiences from the evil yuppie



# Hip to Be Square!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ruw9fsh3PNY>



## **In Sum**

Hollywood's engagement with the most prominent 1980s social-type – the Yuppie – has tended to be misremembered as largely celebratory

Yet, Hollywood's initial depictions of these young, urban professionals usually imagine this new demographic as alienated and unfulfilled

Some of these self-promoting allegories targeted affluent middle-class Americans with tales of their like embarking on urban adventures

Later films transformed the yuppie from under-stimulated success story into malignant narcissists; greedy, superficial, cruel, selfish, and violent

These were initially aimed at young people, but by decade's end shifted to thrillers aimed at an American middle-class suffering financial strain



# **Next Time...**

We will reconsider Hollywood's engagement with a group oftentimes thought of as overlooked by American media of the 1980s

Topic 6: LGBTQ Cinema

Reading: Doty, "Queer and/as Gender in Pee-Wee's World"

Home Screenings: *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985)

*A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*  
(1985)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 5 December