

From Nerds to Napoleons: Thwarting Archetypical Expectations in High School Films

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“And the number one sign that you’re not the most popular guy in school?”

“#1? How the heck would I know? I’m like the coolest kid in school. Gosh!”

—Jon Heder, appearing as Napoleon Dynamite
on *The Late Show with David Letterman*

In the past twenty years of teenage angst movies, perhaps the most memorable message is delivered by the nerd archetype at the end of John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club*. Asked to write a 1000-word essay explaining what they have learned after spending a Saturday locked in a library for detention, the other students, a jock, the prom queen, the rebel, and the basketcase characters all convince the brain to write their essays for them. In his essay, he summarizes the rosy lesson each of them learned after the eight hours spent together, thereby emphasizing the function of social groups on identity formation in high school which not only determine who sits where but who can occupy what role in this space (Brian, incidentally, occupies the lowest level in this space). Twenty-four years later after numerous high school films depict the ability of the nerds to overcome their “geekiness” and become just like everybody else, the film *Napoleon Dynamite* challenges this notion and offers a new role model for the high school nerd.¹

Napoleon’s Story

Napoleon Dynamite opens with a brief nod to previous high school films, especially those by John Hughes, with the protagonist and a school bus. Napoleon, a tall, lanky, teenager with tight curly red hair and glasses, boards the telltale yellow bus and bee-lines for the coveted back seat typically reserved for the “cool kids.” However, the only other “kids” on this bus are late elementary/ early middle school students and Napoleon’s claim to the popular space is unchallenged and unnoticed (perhaps because he is older than the other passengers). Napoleon maintains his

confident aloofness, usually claimed by the rebellious teenagers (as in *Heathers*, *Some Kind of Wonderful*, etc) throughout the remainder of the film. Napoleon lives with his rambunctious, fun-loving, grandma and his unemployed, 32-year-old brother, Kip, who spends much of his time in an online chat room. At school, in between being bullied, Napoleon is a member of his school's Future Farmers' of America organization and the Happy Hands Club, a group which performs sign language to pop music lyrics. His friends are the new Hispanic student, Pedro, and Deb, who tries to raise money for college by running a Glamour Shots type studio in her garage and selling woven key chains. When Napoleon's grandmother breaks her coccyx in an accident, his Uncle Rico moves in with him and Kip and proceeds to interfere in Napoleon's life. In the first half of the film, Napoleon and Pedro find dates for the upcoming school dance, and in the second half, the three friends work together to get Pedro elected as class president.

Napoleon Dynamite doesn't resist, reject, or oppose the traditional roles reserved for the nerdy teenager. Early in the movie, Napoleon and his brother visit the local dojo run by a sensei nearly as eccentric as they are. During the sales pitch for his eight week course, Rex (of Rex Kwon Do) lays out his three- step plan to success: One, find a buddy; Two, discipline your image; and Three, possess self-respect. From this point on, Napoleon, albeit unconsciously, illustrates how he already lives by this mantra. In this way, Napoleon subverts what it means to be a nerd as he, Uncle Rico, Kip, and Pedro grapple within a cinematic world that offers only limited and prefabricated niches for each individual. *Napoleon Dynamite's* characters challenge the expectations the audience usually has for the outsiders in school films by continuing to remain in their self-designated and peer designated roles. The message for those watching is multi-layered and multi-faceted, but obviously Jared Hess's film champions those who are able to negotiate high school without eternally questioning their "niche."

For the purposes of narrowing down the vast genre of teenage films, in order to examine the role of the nerd, I consider only those films which were filmed around the same time as or after *The Breakfast Club*, focus on teenagers in a school setting, and feature protagonists or supporting roles of those characters who represent "nerds." While this list includes only twenty films (see appendix A), I feel that it is possible to trace the evolving character of the nerd by noting how they are dressed, talk, treated by their peers, and behave at the conclusion of the film. Furthermore, I analyze the comments posted on the Sundance blog (postings begin November 2004 and still continue to the present time) to illustrate the ways in which those who view *Napoleon Dynamite* are moved by the Hess' ability to capture the "realness" of high school life and offer their opinions as to what Napoleon and his friends mean to them. Finally, in order to gain a better idea of how nerds are categorized and described by those who study high schools, I examine sociological studies about adolescent behavior, more specifically social groups and identity formation, and the influence of film on adolescents in order to illustrate how not only the concept of the nerd has changed in film but how that change could translate or perhaps already has to "real life" nerds.

The Bloggers Versus the Experts?

When I began researching this topic on the web, I was intrigued by the conversations viewers of this film were posting to a website for bloggers who wanted to respond to films shown at the Sundance Film Festival. I was impressed by how many viewers identified with Napoleon, even to the point of using his language. According to Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis, “television, film, radio, and the internet are now the most powerful sites for educating about difference and the production of resentment” (2000). I would suggest that although this notion is true, it’s interesting to consider how blogs may or may not avoid perpetuating the “language of resentment” of which McCarthy and Dimitriadis write. Blogs² continue to affect and influence the public’s opinion and reactions to politics, media, and commerce. According to the Pew Research Center, thirty-two million Americans read blogs in 2004. An editorial in *Technology Review* mentions the “great power” blogs have to “spread the ideas of individuals faster, farther, and more cheaply than anything seen before” (2005, p.17). Because they are “reactive, unmediated, immediate opinion[s]” and a growing number of teenagers either have their own blog or subscribe to a blog site, these postings are becoming part of their identity and influencing their lives. The Sundance blog, which sponsors a site for bloggers to post opinions on the film *Napoleon Dynamite* and to read a review written by Jason Calacanis (2004), includes users under and over the age of 18 and offers a wide variety of responses.³ Many also supply personal anecdotes about their families and their own adolescent experiences as nerds or involvement in situations similar to *Napoleon Dynamite*’s characters. Throughout the 196 postings, bloggers argue over whether or not this is a great film, whether or not Napoleon has special needs, and how the film surfaces in their schools, places of work, and relationships. Several bloggers conclude that those who post unfavorable reviews to the Sundance site probably identify with Summer, Trisha, and Ron, the popular students in *Napoleon Dynamite*, or prefer the more traditional sort of movie with a clear plot and slapstick humor.

Because several responses compared Napoleon to previous film nerds, I began to (re)view high school films in search of the roles nerds played/ did not play in this genre. Rather than explore each film which falls into this broad description, I would rather explore the themes and roles which have been available to high school nerds in previous high school films. Frequently, the roles created for film nerds depict and rely on the negative side to being socially awkward, highly intelligent, and uninterested in mainstream extracurricular activities. Because of the need for someone to inhabit these characteristics, more often than not, nerds play background roles in films. As in *Heathers*, *Mean Girls* and *Just One of the Guys*, they are victims of the popular crowd or serve as comic relief or are acknowledged by the protagonist who suddenly understands how he or she has underestimated this student or social group. The nerds also may undergo poignant transformations, either psychologically or physically or both, as the characters in *The Breakfast Club*, *Can’t Buy Me*

Love, and *She's All That* do, and either retain their popularity or reject it (as the protagonists in the latter two films do).

The stereotypes of schooling and education continue to be topics of conversations in education courses. Recent studies consider the positive influence films can have on preservice teachers, teachers, and students in shaping their notions of the peers and the world around them (Beyerbach, 2005; Dalton, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Shary, 2002). Critics also agree that much of what has been produced and mass marketed by Hollywood is, to use Mary Dalton's words, a "very limited construction of curriculum and radical teaching in popular culture (2004, p. 137). Critics also agree on the role films have on identity formation and the need for media to portray positive adolescent experiences. In *The Cinema of Adolescence* (1985), David Considine writes:

There is little doubt that motion pictures have the potential to influence adolescent audiences. . . Caught in transition the young person is the stage of formulating a new identity. In this process film and the mass media in general have the opportunity to function as a valuable source of information. Excessive reliance upon stereotypes in the past has limited the honesty and the variety of the information imparted to the young. (p. 273-4)

After discussing the ways in which these stereotypes also transform the way the public views institutions, Considine's generalization of most teenage movies still holds true today, although with films like *Napoleon Dynamite*,⁴ the face of teenage films might be changing: "In the cinema of adolescence, whites outnumber blacks, WASPs outnumber other racial and religious groups, big city stories depicting life in Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago by far outweigh images of small town or rural life, and stories about boys outnumber those about girls (1985, p. 274). These stereotypes are not just limited to students either. As Barbara Beyerbach (2005) notes: "More recent films tend to depict teachers even more negatively, as bumbling dullards who lack skills and are generally powerless, or who play adversarial roles toward students" (p. 270) a departure from the films like *To Sir with Love*. When a movie comes out that challenges these stereotypes, it's important for educators to take notice.

It's also important for educators and students to be aware of how the media shapes our idea of what it means to be cool or popular. As many researchers who point out the positive potential for films in creating new avenues for the marginalized, there seem to be twice as many researchers who remark on the dangers of the media in creating false mythologies or perpetuating stereotypes. In *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescents*, Marcel Danesi criticizes movies and television shows for "transform[ing] some ordinary happening into a momentous event" one of the reasons for these media becoming "the *maker* of history and its *documenter* at the same time" and "conversely, television is also *shaping* history" (1994, p. 130, italics in original). He specifies their influence on identity formation in particular: "Teenagers seem to be continually following the lifestyle models that Hollywood and the television networks have intentionally scripted into their adolescent characters"

(1994, xi). Both Quart and Milner accuse mass media marketers of not just exploiting the “popular kids” in high school by persuading them to buy certain items included in their films, but also spending an enormous amount of money observing and studying them to “anticipate” the next “hot item, the thing that must be purchased in order to be cool” (2004, Milner, p. 167). Giroux claims that the dominant media does not “demonize” our youth, instead they “either commodif[y] or construct [them] as consuming subjects” (1997, p. 2). Unfortunately, very few of these sources comment on independent films, other than to exclude them from the large Hollywood conglomerates.

The Nerd’s Place in High School Films

The nerd, however, has not been excluded from films, both independent and mainstream. The prevalence of films which rely on the school nerd stereotype is why I wish to begin with *The Breakfast Club*, a film which explores traditional high school stereotypes. Because most high school films before this one tended to lump together teenagers into two groups: good kids and bad kids, the stories resulted in similar plot lines. In *The Breakfast Club*, however, each character represents a different social group and the hierarchy becomes quickly apparent. And who is at the bottom? Naturally, the others rely on the nerd to write the essay for the entire group. Here are his words which finish his opening remarks from the beginning of the film:⁵

“We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it is that we did wrong. But we think you’re crazy to make us write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us: in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain. . .”

Andrew, “and an athlete,”

Allison, “and a basket case,”

Claire, “a princess,”

Bender, “and a criminal.”

Brian, “Does that answer your question?”

—Sincerely yours, the Breakfast Club.” (1985)

This letter reflects the two roles available to film nerds before *Napoleon Dynamite*. They can discover by the end of the film that they, like Brian, are actually like everyone else, and are accepted by their classmates, (i.e., they get to join the “club.” Think of *Sixteen Candles*, *Lucas*, or *Just One of the Guys*, a film in which a popular, pretty, but smart girl goes undercover as a geek and meets a geek, whom she transforms and ends up with at the conclusion of the film). Or film nerds undergo a complete transformation by exposing to their peers that underneath their veneers there exists teenagers just like themselves (as in *The Breakfast Club*). As Tim Shary (2002) puts it in his examination of nerds in films from the 1980s to the 1990s,

The main emphasis in most nerd films of the ‘80s was on transformation or changing from someone who is smart and physically awkward to someone who is merely

clever but popular and sophisticated, and this emphasis became more complicated in the '90s. Nerds are always "told" to transform, that their present image holds them back from being socially accepted and that social acceptance is indeed more valuable than idiosyncratic individuality, but nerds are usually portrayed as being smart enough to realize the fallacy of this expectation. (p. 40)

Napoleon, Pedro, and Deb fit neither of these portrayals. None of these characters exhibit the "intelligence" found in most film nerds (as in *Weird Science* and *Can't Buy Me Love*, a film which perfectly illustrates the nerd who undergoes a transformation, rejects it, and "wins" the girl, a typical path available to the onscreen nerd). If one were to argue that each nerd in *Napoleon Dynamite* undergoes a transformation, that transformation is so slight that it is negligible. "Popular" and "sophisticated" do not describe them by the end of the film. In the final scenes, Napoleon manages to add one person to his tetherball team (although the audience does like his dance), and Pedro celebrates his victory not with those who voted for him, but his family, acknowledging the importance of culture in identity formation, an often overlooked influence in high school films. And as for Shary's (2002) contention that "smart" film nerds are "smart" enough not to change, or to reject the "rewards" of changing (here Shary refers to the film *She's All That* to make his point), Napoleon, Deb, and Pedro seem oblivious to the fact that they are not socially accepted. They engage in activities such as running for class president, wearing their FFA medals, claiming to be a bowhunter and asking girls out with little hesitation or emotion or differentiating among the different statuses associated with each activity. Instead, they approach each endeavor pragmatically as when Napoleon and Pedro discuss asking the most popular girls to the dance.

Is Napoleon and Pedro's unawareness of their place in the high school social hierarchy typical of today's "nerds"? Or does their portrayal offer a different model for nerds who are uncomfortable with their image? David Kinney (1998), in his study, "From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School," identifies two paths for the "nerd" to become "normal," neither of which explain Napoleon and Pedro, but echo Shary's (2002) observation of the two paths available the film nerd. The first alternative is to "embrac[e] behaviors and appearances that are respected by high-status peers, while the other path hinges on one's emancipation from popular peers' expectations and invidious comparisons" (p. 33). Clearly, Napoleon does not follow the first path and he never really worries about his peers' expectations as he continually experiences "the worst day of school ever" as he endures headlocks, smirks, and sarcastic remarks from his peers. However, the treatment Napoleon receives is not overly violent or humiliating when compared with how his nerd ancestors were tormented.

More recent studies point out the shifts in how nerds are viewed and treated by their peers. Another connection between sociological studies of nerds and the film nerd is the growing popularity of the character. In his study, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, Milner asks "Why has the status of cheerleaders and football stars declined

in many but not all schools?” (2004, p. 3). Shary (2002) answers this question from a cinematic point of view: “Out of the five character types available in most teenage films, the nerd, the delinquent, the rebel, the popular girl, and the athlete, it is the nerd who can not only be endearing but also present a conflict that ‘grants nerd characters a greater dramatic interest’ when he or she can wrap his or her mind around what it means to be a popular” (pp. 35 & 40). Part of Napoleon’s popularity is that he doesn’t even consider himself a nerd. The Sundance bloggers find his hobbies and personality as being “endearing.”

Rule One: Discipline (Not Makeover) Your Image

One of the reasons why studying teenage films helps illuminate the role the nerd plays in a school’s hierarchy is the tie they share with their real counterparts—nearly all teenagers. “Above all else,” according to psychologists Brown and Theobald (1998), “American adolescents are charged with the task of achieving a ‘sense of identity’—crystallizing their self-concept, positioning themselves on a career path, and embracing a set of values and beliefs that will guide their choice of activities that will guide their interpersonal relationships (p. 126). According to Alissa Quart (2003), the media and marketing strategies by corporations affect much of that identity formation. But she contends the target audience of contemporary teen films tends to be the “in crowd” or those popular students and the story line continues to be arrangements of the makeover scene from the end of *The Breakfast Club* when Ally Sheedy’s (the basket case, or goth character as Quart calls her) character pulls her hair back, takes off her shirt, puts on makeup and proceeds to dazzle the athlete and the nerd. By beginning her discussion with *The Breakfast Club* and tracing the teen film to its state a couple of years before *Napoleon Dynamite*, Quart reminds the reader again and again of similar scenes in teenage films. Citing a recent one, *She’s All That*, Quart contends that the purpose of the makeover movie is to “teach kids the importance of having fancy clothes and wearing good makeup” and these “fairy tale transformations don’t happen by magic” (2002, p. 87). Although Napoleon rejects the act of reinventing himself or exposing his true self, does he undergo a “makeover”? If not, then does he fall under Quart’s criticism of the films which “Creat[e] characters who can’t change or become”? (p. 87). And if Napoleon doesn’t undergo the coming of age theme Quart prefers, is that so bad?

One could argue that none of the main characters in the film plays a nerd; in fact, one of the commentators on the Sundance blog claims that Pedro is just misplaced and that he will be fine. Napoleon, on the other hand, is frequently called a “nerd” by movie reviewers (Burrow, 2005; Lally, 2004; Sterritt, 2004). However, once again the discussion on the Sundance blog and my own personal observation exposes something else. Kinney (1998) loosely defines a “nerd” as possibly possessing “superior academic performance . . . others as having low levels of social skills or . . . dressing out of fashion” (p. 27). Napoleon and his friends Pedro, the new Hispanic student, and Deb,

the girl who is stuck in the 80's, represent a new kind of teenage character in this type of film. As one blogger explains, Napoleon is not the "chic geek" Max Anderson from *Rushmore*, but a "geek's geek" (Sundance Blog, Claudia, 2004). But overwhelmingly, the postings name Napoleon as a nerd—in positive terms.

Napoleon, however, doesn't consider himself a nerd or even seem to contemplate the superficial, yet real boundaries which separate him from his peers. But he recognizes others as sharing his space. For example, after seeing a student beat up another student who wears glasses and is awkwardly dressed, Napoleon approaches him and makes him an offer:

Napoleon: "How's your neck?"

Nerd: "Stings."

Napoleon: "That's too bad. (pause) Pedro offers you his protection."

By this point in the film, Napoleon has already realized the importance of having a buddy—not changing one's image or behavior in order to avoid being beaten. After ditching the parachute pants and patriotic t-shirt, Napoleon moves onto the next step, finding a buddy.

Rule Two: Find a Buddy to "Get Your Back"

After demonstrating the need for disciplining one's image by referring to his stars and stripes "M.C. Hammer" pants and patriotic t-shirt, Rex advises his potential students that at "Rex Kwon Do, we use a buddy system, no more flying solo." Although Rex doesn't seem to have a "buddy," these words remain with Napoleon. Friends are undoubtedly important to adolescents and remain a complicated system within a school setting. Typically, the close circle of friends one makes in high school are what constitutes cliques (Brown & Theobald, 1998). According to Brown and Theobald (1998), cliques tend to be "the adolescent's primary source of peer companionship, support, and pressure or influence . . . and have dramatic impact on adolescent's experiences in schools" (1998, p. 127). Cliques in some circumstances have formal rules for membership. Some tend to be rather exclusive. A number of studies remark on the rigidity of these social groups and their purpose in the secondary school (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2000; Gressen, 2004; Steinburg & Kincheloe, 2004; Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003).

Naturally, cliques and buddies are often the sources of conflict in high school films. In reviewing the films chosen for this study, I noticed that for the most part buddies tend to be of the same type, or if they are not then one must undergo a makeover to become like the other one or face rejection, humiliation, or bodily harm. The boy in *Pretty in Pink* rejects his friends and their elitist lifestyle for his girl; in *Clueless*, Cher and Dionne remake Tai into copies of themselves. These relationships are not give and take ones, rather they are attempts made by many teenagers, according to studies, to mold themselves into an identity rather than constructing

their own based on their own interests. Researchers continue to cite peer influence as one of the most important factors in the development of a student's identity, but strong relationships in teenage films emphasize the power, both positive and negative, of influencing students to act.

As they sit on the school's bleachers (in perhaps an homage to *Grease*), Napoleon asks Pedro what kind of skills he has to convince Summer to go to the dance with him. "I don't know" Pedro answers, "I'll probably build her a cake." Later, Napoleon says to Pedro who asks him what kind of skills he has, "I don't have any cool skills like baking a cake or numchakus." Pedro notes, "You can draw, can't you?" And Napoleon proceeds to use his skill and draws a portrait of the popular girl he wishes to ask to the dance. It never occurs to either Pedro or Napoleon that these girls might be "out of their league" because they are "nerds" or "losers." Instead, they work together to find dates.⁶

Rule Three: Maintain an Attitude of Self-Respect

Rex closes his three-step system by crediting self-respect as the means of avoiding failure. Rex is vague on this step, but Napoleon seems to deduce that it has something to do with attitude. While he does not adopt Rex's harsh, commanding voice or seek a Starla-type girlfriend, he does pay attention to the abuse Rico is inflicting on his school image. Did Napoleon think he was popular before Trisha and Summer posted "Bust Must" flyers to his locker? It's possible. The almost cultish popularity of *Napoleon Dynamite*, not just the movie, but actor Jon Heder, mirrors Smith's contention in *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids* about the shifting status of social groups in high school today (2004). Smith seeks to answer the question why cheerleaders and football players don't hold the same status they used to. This movie ventures a guess that it has something to do with Rex's attitude.

Throughout the film, Napoleon also exhibits a strong sense of self respect. After buying his suit for the school dance at a thrift store, the camera captures a shot of Napoleon confidently striding down the street as if he were John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. His response to Pedro and Deb when they ask him where his date has gone during the dance (another homage to Hughes) also illustrates his awareness of the need to preserve some self-respect: "She probably went to the bathroom" he lies. Even when he delivers his outlandish current event report in front of his history class and someone snickers, he shoots them a look before continuing with his story. Napoleon understands the power of confidence and the affect it has on others.

Conclusions

Although *Napoleon Dynamite* thwarts the traditional roles of nerds in high school movies, it does little to dispel the usual depictions of cheerleaders as flighty and insensitive, jocks as bullies, and teachers and administrators as predictable, two-

dimensional characters who are out of touch with today's youth. In fact, the principal quite possibly serves as the most unlikeable character in the film. After learning that Pedro used an effigy of Summer Wheatley, his opponent, as a piñata during his campaign, the principal calls Pedro into his office:

Look Pedro. I don't know how they do things down in Juarez, but here in Idaho we have a little something called pride. Understand? Smashing in the face of a piñata that resembles Summer Wheatly is a disgrace to you, me, and the entire Gem State.

While this scene is comical on the surface, one wonders if Hess is commenting on the sorry state of administrators (Or is he using satire here?), setting Pedro's tactics in contrast to the traditional ones Summer employs, or just trying to make the audience laugh? Another critic might devise a post-colonial reading of Napoleon's rescuing Pedro's bid for student president as a representation of America rescuing the poor, third world nation from disaster (ala *The Magnificent Seven* or its parody, *The Three Amigos*.) A feminist might wonder about Deb and her portrayal as a craft maker and pseudo-photographer (who only photographs males) and how she is easily passed from Pedro to Napoleon. A postmodernist reading might consider Hess's take on the lunch, dance, and bus scenes integral to high school films. But these readings are only possible if educators consider the growing influence of media on our students and continue their efforts in bringing media literacy to high school students.

Undoubtedly, many studies of teen films point out their influence on teenagers and their ensuing behavior and practices based on their viewing of the film. In addition to the many anecdotal stories of college and high school students speaking admiringly of the *Napoleon Dynamite*, 39 out of the 196 Sundance bloggers admit to quoting lines from the movie.

It is common to hear something like this in my school:
 "Matt, did you hand in the assignment yet?"
 "Heck yes I did!" (Sundance blog, Christian, 2005)

Napoleon Dynamite reminds viewers that it's okay to be who you are is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by his dance at the school's election ceremony. This unabashed display of creativity and abandonment essentially captures Pedro's victory (of course his promise that if "you vote for me all of your wildest dreams will come true" probably helped). As one blogger muses,

The important message (in my OPINION) of this movie was about seeking happiness [sic] and about the silliness [sic] of all highschool [sic] (not just the 'losers,' but also the cool kids, the dances, the jocks, etc.) I think it was about being who you are. Napolean [sic] just IS. He makes no apologies for his awkwardness. He finds his happiness in Pedro and Deb. And they have their own happy community. I think that they're much happier than Summer Wheatley or that mean spirited blond dude who scoffs at everything. (Sundance blog, Matt, 2005)

In typical teen movies, the characters must find that person, discover their identities,

overcome their “problems” and become accepted by their communities. As educators, what if we viewed our positions not as companions or guardians, but illuminators? By bringing to our students’ attention stereotyped characters and discussing studies like Kinney’s and Milner’s, students might consider what influence/d/ing their identities. Certainly, the simple three-step policy of Rex Kwon Do already surfaces in new programs designed to protect students from being bullied because they might be different. *Napoleon Dynamite* goes beyond the simple “I’m okay, you’re okay” mantra.

But the real beauty of *Napoleon Dynamite* is its rejection of the feel-good messages of most teenage movies. Unlike his predecessor Brian, Napoleon is not a mixture of a princess, brain, criminal, jock, or basketcase. He’s not even a nerd; he’s Napoleon. After his dance during the election ceremony, the camera pans to the audience, all of whom stand except for Summer and Don. And guess what? The audience looks like a bunch of Napoleons, Pedros, and Debs. They are just normal kids who may be in different social circles, who may be involved in extracurricular activities, and who may not be. The real message is that they are not labeled or as Quart (2004) points out branded by what they do, how they look, or whom they “hang with.”

As *Napoleon Dynamite*’s newness fades, it will join the ranks of the other nerd films. But because Hess offers a third path for the high school nerd, whether he or she be real or fictional, he (and his wife who co-wrote the film) open up new discussions about teenagers and film portrayals. The growing popularity of blogs and the arrival of those “new” voices partnered with research on social groups and adolescent identity formation in high school provides another way of discussing films. Maybe Hess’s message is “It’s okay to be who you are.” In fact, maybe nerds do not have to become “normal” as it seems educators, writers, peers, and even themselves wish them to be. As one blogger points out

Napoleon is proud of who he is and gets by in life with very little fanfare, oblivious to most things impacting him because he is too busy helping others. He obviously does not care what others think of him . . . Not everyone can be a “cool” kid but you should still be proud of yourself and not look for outsider’s acceptance. All that really matters is to be happy with yourself. (Sundance blog, AceM, 2004)

But Napoleon is aware of what’s going on because at the end of each day, he exclaims “Geez, that was the worst day ever.” Whether it’s watching a bus load of elementary school children witnessing a cow shot in the head or having to tell a close friend that a girl turned him down, Napoleon always remains just as he is—an awkward role model for all of those “nerds” out there.

Notes

¹Before I begin discussing any further the “nerds” role in films, I believe a working definition is needed. Although, Napoleon does not display any of the “super-intelligence” indicative of other onscreen nerds, nearly all reviewers apply this nomenclature to him.

Therefore, I am using the term nerd to describe a character who appears to be socially inept, is active in “non-mainstream” activities, and is ridiculed by most of his or her classmates not only for his or her appearance but also interactions with other members outside of his or her circle. This definition also seems to apply to “geeks, freaks, outcasts, and brains” but not the bumbling idiot role afforded to previous teenage films like *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, but to someone like Dawn from *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1998), another character labeled as a nerd who lacks book smarts (2002, Shary, p. 38). This definition also resembles the one Kinney employs in his study of adolescent nerds.

² A blog is an abbreviated form of the term “web log” or a sort of online journal, originating in the United States in 1997 (Britannica). Usually, a blog is created and updated by one user, but Calacanis, the creator of this particular blog, invites readers to respond to his review of *Napoleon Dynamite*.

³ According to the Sundance website, the only postings that are removed are the ones which are advertisements. The site suggests then that this process remains fairly unmediated.

⁴ Encouraged by the occasional teenage movie like *Save the Last Dance*, Shary suggests that the “American film industry would do well to produce many more images of youth like this” (2002, p. 262). I think that he and Considine would approve of much of the portrayals in *Napoleon Dynamite*.

⁵ It is interesting to note that Anthony Michael Hall, who plays Brian the “nerd” in *The Breakfast Club* played a similar role in the high school movie, *Sixteen Candles*. In both films, he becomes accepted by the “popular” students. This acceptance is contrary to Napoleon’s experience because he is never accepted by the “popular” students Summer Wheatley and Don.

⁶ A common plot in many teenage films like *10 Ways I Hate You*, but the first time it’s been done without a thorough makeover or Cyrano de Bergerac type plot and certainly the first time a cake has been involved.

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Appendix A

List of Nerd Films

I do not claim this list to be the definitive list necessary for a discussion about film nerds. Instead, it is an arbitrary compilation of films that I have seen and considered when writing this essay:

- 10 Things I Hate about You* (1999)
- American Pie* (1999)
- Better off Dead* (1985)
- The Breakfast Club* (1985)
- Can't Buy Me Love* (1987)

A Cinderella Story (2004)
Class Act (1991)
Clueless (1995)
Ghost World (2001)
Heathers (1989)
Just One of the Guys (1985)
Lucas (1986)
Mean Girls (2004)
Not Another Teen Movie (2001)
Pretty in Pink (1986)
The Princess Diaries (2001)
Rushmore (1998)
She's All That (1999)
Sixteen Candles (1984)
Some Kind of Wonderful (1987)
Welcome to the Dollhouse (1996)