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The Timeless Legacy of Heathers

Vancouver based freelance writer [Marta Djordjevic](#) writes about the timeless legacy of the film *Heathers*, and why the 1989 cult teen film is now more relevant than ever before.

When Michael Lehmann's brazen teen comedy *Heathers* came out in 1989, audiences simply weren't ready for its hyper-stylised depiction of teenagers with over-the-top antics that seemed ludicrous in every sense of the word. Coming out at the tail end of a John Hughes dominated era with cookie-cutter adolescent films such as *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles*, *Heathers* opted to be realistic in its themes - touching upon ones that actually concerned teenagers and even lead them to obsessive tendencies. Whilst being deliberately exaggerated, *Heathers* still manages to be more genuine than its Hughes-esque counterparts, tearing down the conventions of the popular teen

genre. The film satirises murder, suicide, bullying, cliques, eating disorders, and rape - topics that are dealt with in such a blunt and detached way that some suggest the movie would never be made today.



The truth is, it probably wouldn't, as even the Heathers reboot that was scheduled to premiere earlier this year was scrapped before it could air - out of respect to many of the school shootings that have happened across the US. Ironically enough, the movie that was faced with harsh criticism of its outlandish depictions of American youth, now captures the true essence of what being a teenager is like, prophesying the gun culture and violence within the school system.

After establishing herself as the goth alt queen of the late '80s with her role in Beetlejuice, Winona Ryder plays Veronica, a 17-year-old who has decided to turn on a clique she's now become a part of - a trio of callous alpha girls all named Heather. Coordinating to such a perfection that it makes the Mean Girls Plastics look unkempt, the Heathers were deadly, deciding bigger was better, from their oversized blazers to

their huge hair. Veronica falls for the weirdo new kid JD (Christian Slater) and they work together to murder their popular classmates, making them all look like suicides - abolishing the social hierarchy at their high school.



While it's to be noted that its cult teen contemporaries such as Mean Girls, Glee, Easy A, and Gossip Girl all borrowed elements from Heathers, they still work to serve up morally and socially affirming values, ones that are spoon-fed down our throats. At the end of the day, these values go back to John Hughes films, which essentially pioneered these messages to teens everywhere. Sure, the villains in these movies were nasty, but nothing they did was out of the ordinary. With everyone having grown up and gone through the exasperating ordeal that is high school, the simple lesson of staying true to oneself isn't all that new - especially when it's been served to us for decades, mutilating the entire genre. The problem is that the stories aren't jarring enough, not cutting enough to show that, quite frankly, teenagers are even more nihilistic than adults.

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Heathers doesn't set out to do heartwarming or inspiring; in fact, it scoffs at it. Daniel Waters' unabashedly sharp script is so satirised, it's mature. The mockery of the disturbing subject matter all yields a purpose and it's through that comedy that the provoking

themes are presented to its audience. When Heather McNamara (Lisanne Falk) is raped by a drunk jock in the background of one scene, it paints the picture of a blind eye being taken to sexual abuse. In another, Heather Chandler (Kim Walker) is forced into oral sex and then proceeds to swish her mouth with water and spit it out at the bathroom mirror - the self-loathing all apparent and disturbing. Bulimia is another hot topic that Heathers defiantly decides to showcase. Early in the film, Heather Duke (Shannen Doherty) asks Veronica to help her induce vomiting in the washroom, with the others mocking her ordeal. Later on, after Heather Chandler's demise, she's seen eating without a care, binging to oblivion. Emphasising the level of long-term psychological effects of the pressure to remain relevant and popular as a teen are presented to us in such a brutal way that as light-hearted as it is, it's uncomfortably heavy.



Waters' genius way of using repetition throughout the film also harks to the idea of life repeating itself, be it through its monotony or intensity of high school life. From the conversations that Veronica has with her parents, to certain facts the characters state about themselves, things seem to repeatedly happen twice in this fictional world. Speaking to a teenager's mind that no matter what they do, the angst will always be there isn't generational - it's timeless.

To this day, Heathers has left a standing impact that perhaps may never go away. On the surface, one can chalk up Heathers' cult status to its cheeky quotes and characters' nostalgic outfits that call to the vintage resurgence millennials love so much. No, Heathers is more than that. Upon its release, reporters called it, "unbound by plausibility." Perhaps it wasn't plausible at the time, but as Heathers predicted, its concerns are all very much apparent, resonating starkly with an entire generation, now 30 years later. As JD says to Veronica right from the get-go "The extreme always seems to make an impression."

You can read more of Marta's work over on her film and music blog ParadisePlayground.net.



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