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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE:

A CINEMATIC VIEW FROM THE 1980s

VOLUME I (CHAPTERS 1 TO 5)

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY

MARIA MORAITES

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JANUARY 1997

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I am also deeply grateful to my two sons, Nicholas D. Sato and Christopher G. Sato, who stood by me when things became difficult and provided computer assistance as needed.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my father and mother
Panayiotis and Parthenope Moraites

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THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE:
A CINEMATIC VIEW FROM THE 1980S

This study looks at Hollywood films and their depiction of the role of formal and informal education in the lives of teenagers in American society. Prototypes of the "teenage education" genre from 1955 to 1961 are presented before focusing on films produced during the 1980s. The films are analyzed according to their verbal and nonverbal communication by examining the sound and visual images they contain. The 1980s films are further analyzed in terms of their depiction of public and private school experiences and the black, white, Hispanic and women's experiences. The study seeks to answer the following questions: How is the high school as an institution portrayed? How are the principal participants (administrators, teachers, athletic coaches, staff members, parents and students) portrayed? What problems are

identified?

Three main themes emerge from the prototypes that become important in the films of the 1980s. The first is the importance of the success or failure of cross generational communication between teenagers and adults. The second theme is that of a separate teenage culture which has its own language, modes of behaviour and values. This not only makes cross generational communication difficult but also peer communication, because of the existence of subgroups which greatly differ from each other. The third theme is the importance of the peer group--whether one is considered as being in or being out. It is the source for a great deal of the information that is communicated and is generally the most important force in a teenager's life.

The high school experience of the 1980s that is depicted in films is mainly a white, male, middle-class experience despite an increase in the depiction of black and Hispanic school experiences. The majority of high school principals and classroom teachers presented are white males.

Most films focus on white male student experiences. While many parents are portrayed negatively, the need for parental support and communication is presented as important to teenagers. The main concern of most high school students is having good peer relationships. Informal learning has a greater impact on their lives than formal classroom education.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Popular films are cultural documents communicating through sound and image beliefs, values and attitudes. As documents they provide us with selected reflections of reality, rather than a complete picture. According to Lester Friedman in his book Hollywood's Image of the Jew, "American movies have the ability to capture the spirit of an age, to become cultural documents that freeze a moment in time so we may study it." Hollywood films, unlike other kinds of films, i.e. instructional or documentary, are aimed at the mass audience that goes to see films at movie theaters and tend to communicate what is believed will appeal to this audience. Since films are a collaborative effort by many different people, they also communicate the collective cultural experiences of their creators. By looking at films over a period of time we can begin to understand what beliefs, values and attitudes are thought to be important in a given culture. It must be kept in mind that:

The messages we receive from a given movie may not be at all what its creators intended. . . . As with any art form, good movies allow for a variety of interpretations, ones that change over the years. . . . Films never tell the total story of any one incident or historical period; they present aspects of a situation, subjective views that select and highlight certain parts of the whole.¹

This study is not meant to be scientific and no attempt is made at quantitative analysis. While certain frequency of patterns may be noted, i.e. that the majority of the main characters are male rather than female or that most schools shown represent the white middle class high school experience, the focus is on describing and interpreting what is being communicated. Popular films are not factual documents. They are creative manipulations of sound and visual elements that are understood by a culture. Their function is to communicate an experience in story form.

For the purposes of this study, we will consider only Hollywood films (American narrative feature films intended for viewing in movie theatres) about teenage education as constituting their own genre. "Genre is a French word for a

¹Lester D. Friedman, Hollywood's Image of the Jew, (New York: Federick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982), viii.

literary type. In film study it represents the division of movies into groups which have similar subjects and/or themes."²

According to Richard M. Gollin in his book, A Viewer's Guide to Film Arts, Artifices and Issues, genre can be defined as "customary, highly conventional, recurring combinations of plots, characters, settings, and other attributes" which "together create familiar patterns of expectation and dramatic experience." A genre "can transmit and reinforce certain complex attitudes and values from generation to generation. . . . Persistent genres develop customary clusters of surface characteristics, a set vocabulary of sound, settings, props, costumes and kinds of characters signify certain coded meanings understood by the audience." Thomas Schatz in his book, Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System, believes that "a genre can be studied, like a language, as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated consciously or otherwise, through cultural consensus." It comes ". . .

²Stuart M. Kaminsky, American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film, (New York: Dell, 1977), 10.

into being precisely because of its cultural significance as a meaningful narrative system."³

As with all genres, the "teenage education" films have in common a basic pattern or formula which has been repeated so often that several parodies have emerged in recent years. Students fall into specified categories and roles and tend to be either for or against the formal educational system. Heroes are generally males, whether at the administration, teacher or student level. Parents tend to be nonexistent or a major obstacle. The multiculturalism of American society is not well represented. Students and schools mainly depict white middle class America. Asians and Native Americans do not seem to exist in high school. Hispanics appear mainly in films about lower class schools, and except for the film Stand and Deliver, the focus is usually on the white or black students. Lower class and predominantly black schools are thought of as jungles infested with drugs and violence. In some ways the "teenage education" genre has replaced the

³Richard M. Golin, A Viewer's Guide to Film Arts, Artifices and Issues, (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1992), 119; Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genre: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 19.

western by becoming the battleground between what is seen as a kind of savage wilderness and the forces of civilization, between the new and old ways of life, between the students and the older generation of parents, administrators and teachers.

This study examines Hollywood films and their depiction of the role of teenage education in the lives of the adolescents in our society. It begins by examining prototypes of the "teenage education" genre from 1955 to 1961 including such well known films as Blackboard Jungle, Rebel without a Cause, High School Confidential, and The Cool and the Crazy. The study then focuses on films from the 1980s beginning with Fame and concluding with such films as Lean on Me, Stand Up and Deliver, and The Dead Poets Society. While some of the films chosen for this study deal directly with formal education and for the most part use the school structure as a major setting, others move outside of the school and depict the importance of informal education particularly that which comes from interacting with one's peer group. The films include educational experiences in public, private, preparatory and military schools. Although most of the schools depicted

draw their students from the middle class, both the lower class and upper class educational experiences are represented. Films containing minority educational experiences in America's multicultural society have also been included whenever possible.

As with any classification, there are overlapping areas with other genres. Those films whose focus is primarily outside the teenage education area are not included. Thus, for example, films like those which are basically horror or science fiction films, but involve a teenage education setting, will not be considered as part of this genre. While this study attempts to cover as many films as possible that focus on teenage education, which were produced during the 1980s, it does not claim that every film has been included. For the most part the films selected are to be considered as individual links on a genre chain that combine elements of our cultural past with the present.

The films are analyzed according to their verbal and nonverbal communication. In terms of sound, not only are the use of dialogue and narration considered, but also the choices of music and sound effects. In terms of visual

images, the mise-en-scene (selection of setting, costume and make-up, character movement and lighting) is examined to show how it plays a major role in nonverbally communicating the ideas of the filmmakers. In particular, this analysis concentrates on the depiction of the teenage education experience. It seeks to answer the following questions: How is the high school as an institution portrayed? How are the principal participants (administrators, teachers, athletic coaches, staff members, parents and students) portrayed? What problems are identified?

CHAPTER 2

BLACKBOARD JUNGLE AND REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE:

PROTOTYPES OF TEENAGE EDUCATION AND REBELLION

This chapter will look at two films, Blackboard Jungle and Rebel without a Cause, in order to create a perspective --establish a prototype for my study which will concentrate on the 1980s. Produced in the same year, these films mark the starting point for the genre of the 1980s, as well as, two different focuses on teenage education. Both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will be used to establish the prototype for the "teenage education" genre of the 1980s.

Blackboard Jungle

The film, Blackboard Jungle, produced by Pandro S. Berman and directed by Richard Brooks in 1955, appeared at a very important time in the history of filmmaking. Up until about the middle 1950s the mass audience that came to see films was intergenerational. Most films were made to appeal to as wide a group of people as possible. Filmmakers were

almost exclusively American or European white males. Films tended to depict the white culture. During the 1950s film attendance dropped sharply. The older generation began to prefer staying home and watching programs on their newly acquired television sets. The intergenerational audience suddenly became predominantly an adolescent one. The postwar prosperity enjoyed by many Americans provided American teenagers with money and time to make a more gradual transition from childhood into adulthood. The general society began to think of adolescence as an important transition period. For filmmakers this was a new and challenging market into which to tap.

According to the New York Times Encyclopedia of Film in February of 1955:

The public--the potential audience--is not a fixed and static quantity. . . . It is being replenished every day by the oncoming flow of youngsters who are discovering the varieties and delights of entertainment. . . . The circle of juvenile interest is believed by theater men to be coming full swing.¹

At the same time as these numbers of juveniles began

¹"Survey of the Movies: Out of a Crisis They Achieve a Stability," Gene Brown ed. and Harry M. Geduld Advisory ed. New York Times Encyclopedia of Film 1952-57 (New York: Times Book, 1984), February 6, 1955.

to change the makeup of the film audience, a great deal of public attention was focused on juvenile delinquency. Earlier films in the 1930s (Dead End, Angels with Dirty Faces, Boys Town) had portrayed juvenile delinquency. These films were based on the belief that environment in the form of a slum or reform school traps individuals and forces them to follow a life of crime in order to survive. While films about juvenile delinquency peaked in popularity in 1938, two films in 1949, Knock on Any Door and City across the River briefly revived the thirties environmentalist view "that juvenile crime is the direct result of slum living."²

There was renewed interest in juvenile delinquency in 1955 as a Senate subcommittee held hearings on this problem in Los Angeles. This created a great deal of argument about the impact that films had on youth and juvenile delinquency. The Vice President of Paramount, Y. Frank Freeman, declared at the time:

I am one of those who believe the fault for juvenile delinquency does not lie in the newspapers, in the movies or in television. When you wind it all up, you come right back to the foundation of our way of life--the home--and

²Peter Purdy, The Hollywood Social Problem Film (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1981), 144.

divorce and drinking.³

The time was once again right for Hollywood filmmakers to tap into a subject that had so much public interest.

Blackboard Jungle, produced by Pandro S. Berman and directed by Richard Brooks, released in 1955 by MGM, was initially presented as an adult film examining the problems of juvenile delinquency in a high school setting. Its prologue, shown while martial music played in the background, was directed towards an adult audience warning them against what it viewed as a new and growing threat to our society:

Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency --its causes and its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools. The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem. It is in this spirit and with this faith that Blackboard Jungle was produced.⁴

The film, however, tried to appeal to its new adolescent audience by being the first to introduce their

³"Hollywood Test: Movies Defended, Assailed in Kefauver Probe of Films Effect on Youth," Gene Brown ed. and Harry M. Gedult, Advisory ed. New York Times Encyclopedia of Film (New York: Times Book, 1984) June 26, 1955.

⁴Blackboard Jungle, 35 mm, 101 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1955.

latest form of popular music--"rock 'n' roll." Immediately following the prologue came the title sequence with the sound track music of "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and His Comets. This music continued over the first scene of the outside of a city school showing the students socializing and dancing to the beat. Thus the prologue and its clear verbal message accompanied by martial music appealed to an adult audience, while the "rock 'n' roll" sound track carried an even stronger nonverbal message that the film's anticipated audience were the teens themselves. "Rock 'n' roll" was the voice of a new era--an integral part of the rebellion that teenagers felt as they struggled to make their own culture.

The popularity of the film and "rock 'n' roll" music soon led to the making of other films specifically created and targeted towards the adolescent. Films like Rock Around the Clock in 1956 ushered in a series of musicals. The combination of "rock 'n' roll" music, adolescent culture and the high school experience became synonymous. By 1979 certain patterns were so well known by the audiences that parodies of the "teenage education" genre were made like the film Rock and Roll High School. Looking more closely at

Blackboard Jungle we can begin to understand what beliefs, values and attitudes were considered important at the time and how they were communicated. We can also begin to discern certain patterns that were to be repeated in later "teenage education" films.

The setting of Blackboard Jungle places us in a city humming with activity. There is an L train winding its way around large buildings where the air is filled with black smoke. In the streets below we see a passing bus and children playing with a fire hydrant. As a mother pulls her small child away we hear the comment, "Do you want to be a bum?" This is followed by teenagers dancing and smoking behind the iron fence that surrounds the local high school. Thus a clear connection is made between the mother's comments and the actions of the teenagers. This is reinforced as we enter the high school and later listen to the comments of the teachers who are concerned about teaching a disorderly mob. They think of the students as garbage and the school as a garbage can. As one teacher puts it, teaching is reduced to sitting on the can "so women can walk around the city without getting attacked." The question is raised whether all the kids in the school are

bad? This becomes a key issue as the film progresses. A belief in the possible underlying goodness of the students is necessary in order for teaching to take place. Otherwise the school is simply a temporary prison for containing juvenile delinquents.⁵

In such a setting the film predisposes the audience to expect violence. The prologue has already told us of the growing problem with juvenile delinquency and the title itself indicates that schools can be jungles--which are associated with danger and wild animals. This is visually represented as a group of male students whistle and reach out from behind the wrought iron school fence towards a young woman passing by. A teacher at the beginning warns another "don't be a hero and don't turn your back on the class."⁶

The school, Main Manual, is a vocational one. All the students and all but two of the teachers are male. The neighborhood is poor and as the film discloses the inhabitants are multicultural with poor whites, Puerto

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

Ricans and blacks living together. The principal, teachers and most of the students are white. The white students have names that indicate a variety of cultural backgrounds, i.e. Irish and Italian. Only one student is identified as Puerto Rican. He is depicted as very talkative and happy. His choice of words and accent indicate he belongs to the lower class. One student in the back of the main classroom has an Asian-looking face, but is only present as part of the background. There are a few African American students who are also shown as part of the background. The only time that the African American students are seen doing something is in a scene where they have gathered to rehearse a gospel song for a school program. Their choice of music and demeanor suggest that they are cooperative and well behaved as they follow the directions of their singing leader, Miller.⁷

Throughout the film Miller is depicted as strong, quiet and sensitive to the feelings of other students. He is shown talking to both African American and white students. His choice of words and speech patterns are more

⁷The use of first or last names for characters depends on the usage in a particular film.

standard English than Black English suggesting that, while he may be poor, he has no problem in communicating with the white middle class as represented by the principal and teachers. Only one man in the school, presumably the vice principal, greets the students and teachers at the beginning of the school year in a lower class New York dialect, thus identifying himself as one who has come from a neighborhood like the one of the school.

The main concern of the teachers is discipline. Discipline is equated with obedience. The teachers expect that the students will follow their directions, stay in their seats during class time and do the work that they are asked to do. Without discipline, teaching is believed to be impossible. The school is seen faced with the responsibility of containing and disciplining students so that it can provide an environment in which teaching can take place.

The school building is shown mainly in close-up and medium shots. It is dimly lit and outside of an American flag prominently displayed in the classroom sequences, there are no decorations to break up the harshness of the bare walls. The small outside courtyard is enclosed by a metal

fence adding to the feeling of confinement. Only vague outlines of other buildings are seen from the windows. The sound of a passing L train reminds us that there is a city outside, while the ticking of a clock creates a feeling of tension during several scenes of confrontation in the classroom. The portrayal of the setting makes one feel that the school is like a cold impersonal cage in which the inhabitants are confined. Later on in the film the English classroom is given the feeling of a factory setting as it is physically shaken and bombarded by the sound of a nearby machine shop. In such an environment teaching becomes very difficult.

When an ideal middle class high school is shown in the film we are given a wide view of the campus which is surrounded by grass and trees. We hear the singing of the national anthem as background music, while students are shown actively learning. A young girl is reciting in Latin. There is a science class with students surrounded by test tube apparatus and an assembly hall full of students standing together and singing. Everyone is well dressed and the principal is standing and singing along with the students. In this setting the high school is portrayed as a

positive institution where students participate in learning experiences.

Unlike the lower class vocational high school, the middle class institution is shown as free of discipline problems. The lessons in Latin and science are geared for those preparing to go on to college, rather than for those who have to learn how to get a job. The institutional environment is thus keyed into the problem of juvenile delinquency. Only in a poor environment is this violence bred. Students at Main Manual are doomed. They are not being prepared for higher education and opportunity. As Edwards, the new math teacher, points out, his students cannot even do simple math. The only thing that keeps them in school is not yet having reached the required exit age.

Parents are never seen nor heard from in the film. They are alluded to by the teachers who see them as part of the cause of the misconduct of the students. The kids are rough because of the way they have been talked to by the tough older men--the fathers. A policeman tells us that the present students were probably five or six during World War II. While their fathers were in the army their mothers worked in a defense plant. Without their parents there was

no home life, no church life, no place to go. The ideal good family structure with a strong and supportive father and a nurturing stay-at-home mother was absent. Children did not grow up in a secure loving environment and taught good values. They were left to fend for themselves without good role models or a sense of morality. This has resulted in children who are mixed up, suspicious and scared. They thus have banded together into street gangs and their leaders have replaced their parents. Under these circumstances the high school is seen as having to take over the disciplinary role that formerly belonged to the parents and compete with the gang leaders for control of the students.

The administration, in the role of the principal, seems to be genuinely concerned with having the students, regardless of skin color, receive the same education and be treated equally. He is shown as strong and decisive in his words and actions. Outside of one scene in which the main character, Mr. Dadier, is wrongfully reprimanded for an assumed racial slur, however, there is never any active role taken by the principal. No sense of direction or purpose for the school is ever presented. Nor is any real ongoing

communication shown between the administration and the teaching staff.

The main character and hero of the film is the newly hired English teacher, Mr. Dadier. As a World War II veteran who has just graduated from a girls' college that accommodated returning veterans, he is unprepared for his first teaching assignment in an inner city vocational high school. He immediately voices his main concern over possible discipline problems. The principal denies that there are any, while the returning faculty make it clear that he should be prepared for dealing with his students. This is visually reinforced by showing the history teacher, Mr. Murdock, jabbing at a punching bag at the first meeting of the faculty in the gym.

Dadier is conservatively dressed in a suit and tie and has a soft voice which we learn can become more commanding because of previous dramatic training in high school. As he enters his classroom, the way he touches the desks portrays a feeling of caressing something one loves. The other new teacher of math, Josh Edwards, walks in and verbalizes what they both feel about being hired to teach: "Makes you feel good doesn't it. Didn't think it would affect me this way--

after all it's only a job. Can't remember being so excited." What the film tries to convey in this short sequence is that teaching is something both of these men value by their attitudes towards the physical classroom setting. Teaching is not only a job--it is something that has a great deal of passion attached to it.⁸

Just as Dadier is looking forward to teaching, he is also looking forward to another role--that of being a father. Dadier's roles as teacher and father figure become linked. One of his students nicknames him Daddy-O rather than pronounce his name correctly. He thus symbolically becomes the possible father figure lacking in the lives of his students. Success in teaching is equated with success in becoming a father. The film, however, poses the potential for failure in both areas. Not only must Dadier find a way to control and reach his students so learning can take place, but he must also protect his wife whose last pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. The enemy that he must face and conquer becomes the students. This is visually symbolized by some "crazy kids" in a car causing another car

⁸Ibid.

to overturn on the sidewalk narrowly missing Dadier as he is walking with his wife.

Dadier and two other new teachers are thrust into a trial by fire ordeal to show if they are worthy of acceptance. The female teacher, Lois Hammond is presented as being very sexually provoking, wearing a tight sweater and pulling up her nylons while on the school stairs. Her main concern is "to be liked" by her students--an American value that "is culturally induced at an early age and continued throughout life."⁹

After Lois Hammond is rescued from an attempted rape at the school by Dadier, she seems to have no traumatic problems. Instead she is portrayed very unsympathetically as she attempts to seduce Dadier. Even Dadier's wife voices the belief that rape is often the fault of the woman, when she asks her husband if Lois might have provoked the boy who raped her. What the film seems to be saying is that women--and especially attractive women--have no place in a high school. They are a disruptive force for both students and

⁹Robert Friday, "Contrasts in Discussion Behaviors of German and American Managers," in Intercultural Communication: A Reader, 7th ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994), 276.

male teachers.

The attitudes toward women that are expressed represent conservative white middle class values with Dadier's wife as the spokesperson. Mrs. Dadier is an expectant mother worried about how her husband feels about her as her body enlarges with her pregnancy. Having her be suspicious of another woman is thus plausible. It is also a necessary plot device in this film. The problem is that it uses a sexist point of view. The single career woman is being scrutinized, while the nice wife and mother-to-be is presented in a more positive manner. The camera also is used as a voyeur focusing in on Lois Hammond to reveal that she is physically attractive. Just as the men comment upon her appearance and view her body as sexually provoking, so too does the camera.

The new math teacher, Josh Edwards, shown as thin and with glasses portraying an intellectual type, tends to be overly enthusiastic and nervous about his ability to communicate with the students. Although he mentions being in the war, little is known about his personal life. What is important during the film is that he likes the music of a past era. As a collector of swing music, he hopes to use

music to reach his class about math. This becomes his fatal mistake. The students destroy his record collection, because it has no meaning for them. He cannot teach them because he fails in following one of the first rules of communication--know your audience and communicate in language they understand. Swing is the music of the older generation, while "rock 'n' roll" is the music to which the teenage generation in the film relates.

Murdock, as the cynical history teacher, represents the burnt out older teacher who has given up trying to teach and has become a temporary gatekeeper of "the garbage can." He voices the attitude of the teachers when he states: "What are we supposed to do with a lot of kids who don't want to learn?" Despite his cynicism he tells the other teachers not to underestimate the students. When one teacher fantasizes of a way to get rid of the students by tricking them into trying out a rigged electric chair, Murdock warns that the students are more likely to find a way to use it to execute their teacher.¹⁰

Dadier, on the other hand, is determined to find a way

¹⁰Ibid.

to get through to the students. After he and Edwards are attacked by some of his students, he proclaims that he is beaten up but not beaten. Then while seeking answers from his former teacher, Dadier is forced to face his basic motivation for being a teacher. What he reveals is that teaching is a way of being creative: "By teaching I'd like to be creative. Help to shape young minds--sculpt lives."¹¹

As Dadier learns from a meeting with his former college professor, he'll have to find his own way to teach his students. While university professors are blamed for not preparing teachers to teach the children of this generation, no direction is given to Dadier. Instead he is sent back to Main Manual after being told he is like a blind man who visits an elephant, feels his tail and then comes to the inaccurate conclusion that elephants are like snakes. It is now up to him to reassess the situation and reach his students. He is like an explorer sent into the wilderness to communicate and control the natives without any previous knowledge or training for what he is about to face.

The students who are representative of the juvenile

¹¹Ibid.

delinquents are portrayed as mainly white. They are shown spending their time in the streets smoking, drinking and stealing. The only motivation given for their actions by their leader, West, is that by being in jail they will be exempt from the draft and getting their head blown off in a war. In a life without purpose, education for them has no meaning.

The only student who is portrayed as working and trying to learn something connected with his job as a mechanic, is the African American student named, Miller. He is portrayed as tall, confident and in control. Dadier tries to win his support after he says the school records indicate that Miller is smart and a born leader. Miller, however, manages to remain independent from all sides even though he is shown as relating to and concerned about other students, regardless of their race. In one scene he asks a white classmate why he made a kid cry. Later he defuses a situation between Dadier and a student Santini, who he explains grins because he is an "idiot boy." Throughout the film he is also a constant reminder of prejudice, challenging Dadier's attitudes towards other ethnic groups, while being constantly blamed for the actions of others--

throwing a baseball at the blackboard and accusing Dadier, in a report to the principal, of being a racial bigot.¹²

Miller is also set apart by the music he selects for a Christmas program. Rehearsing fellow black students in a rendition of the spiritual "Go Down Moses," he insists that it be sung as it is supposed to be without being jazzed up. Sound thus sets him apart from the "rock 'n' roll" generation, establishes he has some religious background, and opens the possibility that he can help Dadier lead the students to the promised land of education.

Miller is the only student with a future. He is realistic about his situation as he justifies being a mechanic. In a prejudiced society, this is one job where the color of his skin won't matter. Miller's attitude is negative towards more schooling. As he says, "What's the use--nobody gives a hoot--students, teachers, my folks." He believes that he has no choice. More education thus has no value. For Dadier, this is an unacceptable position.¹³

Miller and Dadier talk from different sides of the

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

fence. From a student's point of view Miller asks if Dadier thinks that Main Manual is a good school. Dadier in turn verbalizes the teacher's position when he states: "The important thing is do you want to learn?" Ultimately it is up to the teacher, Dadier, to learn how to communicate with the students, motivate them to learn and thus turn the school into something good.¹⁴

A cartoon about Jack and the Beanstalk becomes the answer. Not only are the students familiar with the story, but it is likely that in the historical context of the film they grew up attending Saturday movie matinees devoted to cartoons that were common during the 1940s. Visual education, rather than textbook education, is the way to stimulate the students. To skeptics like Murdock who question the value of movies to motivate students to read, Dadier replies that visual education is a way to stimulate students to use their intelligence. His view of education is to make students "look for real meaning" as he encourages them to think for themselves and question the action of Jack

¹⁴Ibid.

and his right to steal from the Giant.¹⁵

Close up shots showing that West does not enjoy the cartoon cues the audience into his resistance to any new learning. He cannot be reached. During the final scene his attacking Dadier with a knife personifies the wild animal in the school jungle. Since he cannot be tamed, it is necessary to eliminate his presence. When his backup, a student named Bellasi, is stopped by Santini using an American flag to pin him to the wall, West is shown as powerless without his gang members to back him up. By facing and defeating West, Dadier becomes the new leader and father. This is also underscored with the birth of his son allowing him to achieve his dual role of father-teacher.

The ending is predictable in terms of the Hollywood code used as a standard for film production up until 1968. It morally satisfies the audience by having good prevail. The American system of education is portrayed as still viable, as symbolized by the American flag, which doubles as a weapon when used to pin the evil gang member to the wall in the last classroom scene. Ironically it is the "idiot

¹⁵Ibid.

boy's" action which isolates the evil West.¹⁶

The job of combating juvenile delinquency and returning the civilizing forces of education into the former blackboard jungle of secondary education is placed squarely on the teaching profession. The vacuum created by an absence of parental support and family values is to be filled by those whom the film points out are paid as low as a babysitter or soda jerk. To be a teacher means to be dedicated to a profession in which both the public and the students often see little value. As Dadier's wife points out: "Kids are people and most are worthwhile." Everyone "needs the same things--patience, understanding and love."¹⁷

Blackboard Jungle establishes the male teacher as the hero in films about teenage education. This hero is then challenged to find a solution to how to effectively teach the students. The burden of teaching is on his shoulders. Parental support is lacking, and for the most part the administration talks big but does little. The students control the school which has become an educational wasteland

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

--an institutional structure that provides little knowledge for coping with the outside world. Their classroom, as West points out, are the streets in which they must learn to survive.

This film also establishes the teacher as a role model against racial prejudice. Dadier, the principal and Miller are used to confirm the belief that all children in a multicultural society have a right to the same opportunity. Having Miller as a black student be a leader and most promising student nonverbally underscores the value that education can have for minorities. The pairing of a white teacher and a black student to solve the social problems at the school confirms the belief that racial solidarity is possible and the school setting is a viable breeding ground for democratic principles. What is still needed is a solid family base.

Rebel without a Cause

Blackboard Jungle sees juvenile delinquency arising out of an environment of poverty and looks to the teacher to fill in as parent and provide a family base. Rebel without a Cause, on the other hand, produced the same year by David

Weisbart and directed by Nicholas Ray, challenges the old environmentalist view by showing juvenile delinquency in a more affluent middle class environment. Parents are to blame for the actions of their children by being absent, weak or unsupportive. The hero and substitute father figure is no longer a teacher, but a student. Peer group membership and interaction become more important than the educational institution in preparing students for dealing with real life problems. Teenage education moves out into the streets where life experiences become crucial in the learning process. Blackboard Jungle and Rebel without a Cause thus establish the two major trends that are to be repeated in numerous films about teenage education. In the first type there is a focus on the educational institution and formal learning and in the second type there is a focus on the peer group and informal learning.

Unlike Blackboard Jungle, Rebel without a Cause, is clearly aimed at a teenage audience. The three main characters, Jim Stark, Judy, and Plato, are high school students. The film treats them sympathetically as it reveals the reasons for their rebelliousness. They do not belong to a gang, nor are they directly involved in

destructive acts against society. Their actions are cries for help from their parents, a way of drawing attention to themselves and their emotional needs. Outside of Ray a juvenile officer, adults are shown as distant and/or ineffective.

As the film begins we see the character of Jim playing in the street with a windup toy monkey wearing a red hat. Jim is well dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and tie. By his movements we see that he is slightly drunk and acting like a small child. He places the toy monkey on the ground and gently covers it with a nearby piece of paper. He then lays down next to it curling his body into a fetal position. In this way it is established that he is basically a warm, feeling, young person who poses no real threat to anyone--a child waiting for a parent to tuck him in as he did with the toy monkey.

Accompanying these visual images is dissonant jazz music, mixed at the end of this sequence with the harsh sound of screaming police sirens voicing his emotional state. The sirens are his cry for help. When they are later heard in the police station we see Jim mimicking their sound.

The film connects the lives of the three main characters by placing them in the same police station setting and going back and forth between them as we learn why they are there. All three have names beginning with the letter J--Jim, Judy and John (who is nicknamed Plato). We soon learn all three come from affluent white middle class families. They are having problems because of their parents and all three desperately want a strong and loving father. Another element that ties the characters together is that during the course of the film all three wear an article of clothing that is red. In the police station scene, the camera moves from one character to another or shows them in the same shot. Thus the spacial proximity of the figures is reinforced and communicates to the audience that these characters will be linked together in the plot.

When Jim is carried into the police station, he is shown still holding his toy monkey and refusing to let it go. He passes Plato and then is told to stand against the wall next to where Judy is seated. Her bright red coat and dress make her visibly stand out. Her clothing and makeup, along with her actions of running away from home when she has problems with her father, are signs of her trying to get

attention from her father. She is a child unable to cope in an adult world. While she explains how hurt she is that her father called her a tramp when she wore lipstick, her face is shown closeup wearing bright red lipstick. We also see that she has a compact with a design of daisies drawn on the cover. The daisies represent her inner self--still young and innocent. When she gives the detective, Ray, her telephone number to call her father and is told that her mother is coming instead, her anger makes it obvious whose affection she is seeking.

Jim's parents and grandmother are shown well-dressed in evening wear when they arrive to claim him at the police station. Since this is Easter and his parents have chosen to go to a social function rather than spend the day with Jim, they are portrayed as more concerned with social values than with their son. While Jim's father is presented as warm, but weak, Jim's mother and grandmother are shown as overly domineering. Jim tries hard to elevate his father by placing him on a chair that is placed on a platform in the police station. Unfortunately his father is not able to remain in this position as he is constantly confronted by his wife and mother-in-law.

Jim refers to his life as living in a zoo and tells Ray that it is tearing him apart. In a shot through the peep hole of the juvenile officer's door the audience sees what Jim sees--three adults constantly arguing with each other. While what they are saying cannot be heard, closeups of their faces clearly communicate their anger with each other. Jim verbalizes that he is ashamed of his father because he won't stand up to his mother and keep her and her mother from picking on him and making "mush out of him." To be like his father is to be hen-pecked--"chicken." Thus Jim's attitude towards his parents reflects a belief that a father should be in control of a household. A strong father is the role model that a son needs to give him a sense of values--pride and honor.¹⁸

Unlike Jim's father, Ray is a strong male figure who immediately recognizes Jim's pain and opens communication by making it clear he is always available for discussing Jim's problems. Ray encourages Jim to vent some of his emotions by hitting a desk in his office. In this way, Jim is given a socially acceptable outlet for his feelings, while the

¹⁸Rebel without a Cause, 35 mm, 111 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1955.

audience is shown the extent of his pain and anger. He is like a wind-up toy that needs to release its pent up emotions.

Unlike Jim and Judy, Plato has no parents that can be contacted. His parents have abandoned him--his father through divorce and his mother by seeking to travel. Their lack of feeling is underscored by the fact that this is Plato's birthday and he has been left all alone. His response to his feeling of aloneness has been to shoot some puppies. The violence of his action tells us the depth of his anguish. Ray does not talk to him, so we are given little insight into his thoughts. Almost all the verbal information about his family is supplied by a black housekeeper who is shown as emotionally attached to her charge but unable to handle his problems.

An important connection is established between Jim and Plato when Jim offers his jacket to Plato who is cold. While Plato rejects this offer, it is an important signifier of what is to come. Plato is a child in search of a father and Jim by this gesture offers him a possible substitute. Just as Jim took care of his toy monkey, he will now care for Plato. Jim also picks up the compact that Judy has left

at the police station. This serves as an additional connecting device between the two characters.

The setting the following day is a brightly lit middle class neighborhood filled with nice homes and tree-lined streets. Jim verbalizes hope as he begins his first day at a new school, Dawson High. He is shown watching Judy as she is walking nearby. Her dress is now green and she blends in with the colors of the setting. Her rebelliousness is reflected verbally as she calls Jim a yo-yo and then refers to him as a disease when she joins a car load of classmates on the way to school. Unlike Jim who is dressed in a conservative brown jacket, shirt and pants, Judy's friends wear leather jackets, T-shirts and boots identifying them as the bullies or "wheels."

The school is shown as large and well kept. The grounds around are filled with clean, well dressed and seemingly happy students socializing with each other. At the sound of a small cannon being fired by a student there is silence while the American flag is raised. This along with the fact that the students enter the school in an orderly fashion being careful not to step on the bronze school insignia embedded in the entrance steps, gives one a

feeling that the students' attitude towards the school is one of respect. There are no discipline problems here and the students have internalized an acceptable code of conduct.

The school setting, although brief, provides an opportunity to view Jim struggling to learn how to cope with this new culture. First he accidentally steps on the school insignia and then he almost enters the girls' washroom. Ironically the only education that we see taking place is outside of the school structure in the form of a field trip to a nearby planetarium.

Jim enters the planetarium as the lecturer talks about how: "before the end of the earth we will see a star increasingly bright and near and as this star approaches the weather will change." The film thus sets up a parallel between what will happen to the earth and what will happen in the film. Jim is the star whose entrance heralds change. During the course of the lecture Jim's responses to what is being said set in motion the events which will lead to destruction, just as the lecture continues to show how the

earth will be destroyed in a burst of gas and fire.¹⁹

The attitude towards man expressed in the lecture underscores the attitude of society in the film: "The problems of man seem trivial and naive. Indeed man existing alone seems an episode of little consequence." Just as the passing of the earth will not be missed, so man's passing will not be missed. The message delivered to a teenage audience is one of pessimism and futility.²⁰

Education has nothing of value to offer and is meaningless. The futility of communicating with the students is further pointed out in the film when at the end of the lecture an older female teacher tries to get the students' attention. When no one responds she verbalizes the frustrations of many teachers as she says: "Oh what the heck."²¹

It is at this point in the film that the symbolic value of Plato's name comes into play. Plato has been named after a Greek philosopher who along with other Greek

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

philosophers looked at the heavens and tried to determine man's significance and place in the universe. In Plato's anthropocentric world the belief in the importance of man and in the idea that man cannot find truth alone would have contrasted sharply with the attitude towards man expressed in the lecture. As Plato comments upon leaving the lecture room: "What does he know about man alone?"²²

The following confrontation scene between Buzz, the head of the "wheels" and Jim becomes a first act in a modern teenage rites of passage drama. It is played out between the planetarium above and the city below. Caught between childhood and adulthood, these teenage boys believe that honor, of paramount importance, must be defended at all costs. The knife is the ritualistic weapon. The education of the streets becomes a key element in survival. For Jim the ritual is senseless. Backed into a corner and forced to defend himself, he manages to pin down Buzz. His actions, however, show him struggling to avoid getting into trouble. He is not bad. The society around him is the cause of his problems. Further challenged to participate in a "chickie

²²Ibid.

run" to prove himself, he accepts without knowing what it is.

Jim is still a child needing guidance and direction. This is clearly communicated in the next scene when upon returning home he is seen drinking from a bottle of milk. Just at the point that he needs his father the most, Mr. Stark is shown on the floor wearing his wife's apron and trying to pick up some food he has dropped before his wife sees it and becomes angry. It is thus made visually clear that Mr. Stark will be of no help in answering Jim's question of: "What can you do when you have to be a man?"²³

A parallel is made with Judy's predicament at home. Now dressed in a soft pink sweater and with little makeup her attempts to kiss her father are repeatedly rejected. In the same shot, however, her father is seen affectionately playing with her younger brother. The loss of her father's love leaves her isolated. Neither parent tries to communicate with her. The only parental explanation for her actions is given by her mother who tells Judy's father that it is: "just the age when nothing fits." Isolated from her

²³Ibid.

parents and given no direction Judy, like Jim, must learn to be an adult on her own.

The "chickie run" scene completes the rites of passage drama as Buzz and Jim come together to see who will drive their car closest to a cliff before bailing out. When Jim questions the senselessness of the act by asking: "Why do we do this?" Buzz answers by saying: "We gotta do something." For Buzz life thus has no purpose or direction. He, like West in Blackboard Jungle, is living for the moment.²⁴

Briefly Buzz and Jim are connected in the scene. Jim, like Buzz, has also dressed in a leather jacket and jeans and in the course of their conversation both young men begin to like each other. Judy by going from one car to another and giving both men some dirt to rub on their hands completes the visual connection. Despite the connections Jim stands apart from the others by wearing a red jacket instead of a dark brown or black one. This scene can thus be seen as again commenting on the planetarium lecture. Jim is like the bright star that appears before the destruction

²⁴Ibid.

of the earth in a burst of gas and fire. In this case before the death of Buzz as he goes over the cliff and his car explodes.

The end of the "chickie run" scene brings the three main characters again physically together. Jim reaches his hand out to Judy communicating that he is there for her. He also opens up her compact and asks her if she wants to see a monkey as he hands it to her. She has thus become like his monkey at the opening of the film--something that he can love and protect. At the same time Plato also sees Jim as a substitute father. He asks him to come home and have breakfast with him and tells Jim that he wished that he were his dad. Jim, Judy and Plato thus form a surrogate family as a step towards the adult world.

Having proven himself in the "chickie run" and made friends, Jim is no longer willing to settle for his old way of life. As he says to his parents: "I want to do something right?" Seeking their support he is once again caught between them. This is visually portrayed as he stands between his mother, who is on the stairs above, and his father on the stairs below. Furthermore the shot was done with the camera tilted up on one side making the mother look

even more powerful and communicating nonverbally a world that was out of balance. As Jim knocks his father down and kicks in the portrait of his grandmother upon leaving his house, the greatness of his need is again visually communicated.²⁵

At this crucial time none of the parents are there for their children. Judy's parents say nothing to her. Plato's only contact with his father is a letter containing a check from with an attachment stamped with the words "support for son." Even the outside world is not of much help when Jim tries vainly to contact Ray at the police station. The officers are too busy and send him away.²⁶

Alone again the three characters end up in an abandoned mansion. While Jim and Judy pretend to be newlyweds, Plato becomes their guide. As their conversation turns to the question of a room for children Jim and Judy verbalize the adult attitudes that they perceive around them. Plato comments that: "We don't encourage children. They're so noisy and troublesome and so terribly annoying."

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

When Judy asks: "What do you do when they cry?" Plato replies: "Drown them like puppies." In showing them an empty pool as an ideal place for the children he further states: "They can carry on here and you'll never even notice. If you lock them in you don't have to talk to them or see them again." To this Judy responds: "Nobody talks to children-- they just tell them." Thus in this brief scene of role playing the teenagers clearly communicate their isolation and alienation from the adult world. They are being spiritually killed like puppies as the adults fail to communicate with them and respond to their needs.²⁷

For the first time Plato tells about his parents fighting while he was still an infant. When he lays down on the ground and Jim covers him gently as he did the toy monkey, we see that Plato too is wearing red in the form of one red sock. This further nonverbally emphasizes the bond that has taken place between the characters in the space of a day.

As Jim and Judy reflect on what has happened they both center on the importance of love and its connection to

²⁷Ibid.

being lonely. Living in a nuclear family society where finding a life mate is based on love, Jim concludes that: "We're not going to be lonely any more--not you or me." Judy also realizes that she is no longer a child looking for someone to love her, but a woman capable of giving love. Love is thus believed to be the cure for loneliness and of great value. The importance of helping someone who needs them rather than running away is also brought up as having great value and signifying strength.²⁸

Plato unfortunately is still by himself and vulnerable. When pursued by Buzz' friends he cries out for someone to help him. His movement and cries portray a small frightened child. His only security is the gun that he carries. Believing himself abandoned again Plato runs to the planetarium and hides in the lecture room. Jim and Judy, unlike the adults around them, reach out to help Plato, following him and attempting to talk with him. Plato asks apprehensively in the darkness of the room: "Do you think the end of the world will come at nighttime?" Jim

²⁸Ibid.

tries to reassure him by replying: "No, at dawn."²⁹

The ideas of dark and life and light and death thus become connected. Just as the end of the world in the lecture and Buzz's death in the car crash came with a burst of light from an explosion signaling death, so now the outside light from the gathering police cars provokes fear in Plato. Plato is cold as in the beginning of the film and now when offered Jim's red jacket accepts it. While Jim acts rationally to diffuse the situation appealing to the police and secretly removing the clip of bullets from Plato's gun, he is unable to control the adult world. As a policeman suddenly turns on a spotlight upon seeing Plato's gun, Plato rushes forward and is shot down in the blazing light. It is the end of his existence on earth.

Juvenile delinquency in Rebel without a Cause is clearly blamed on the parents. They, like the teachers and police officers in the film, fail to communicate with the teenagers and teach them what is necessary to survive in an adult world. Without strong and loving father figures neither girls nor boys have a clear direction nor purpose.

²⁹Ibid.

In contrast to the need for a good father role model, the position of a mother is seen as less important and often destructive. Jim's mother and grandmother are constantly interfering and emasculating his father. Judy's mother is only concerned with comforting her husband and makes no attempt to communicate with her daughter. Plato is abandoned by both his parents. While little is known about his father, it is clear from the male picture he has prominently displayed in his school locker and dialogue verbalizing his wishful thinking to have Jim as his father, that he too needs fatherly love. There is no feeling expressed about his mother except by the housekeeper who finds the mother's actions of leaving her son on his birthday and unwilling to pay for psychiatric help for her son as not right.

Plato, having no one to love and care for him, becomes a functionless member of society. As such he has no value. For the movie his death is necessary to create change. In the American cause and effect culture Plato is the cause that brings about the needed effect--a change in the relationship between Jim and his father. Realizing that Jim instead of Plato, who is still wearing Jim's red jacket,

could have been the one killed, Mr. Crawford now offers the help his son so desperately needs as he states: "You can depend on me. Whatever comes we'll face it together." As he helps Jim stand up and puts his coat around his son's shoulders he communicates by his actions that he is assuming the role of a strong father in order to ensure the survival of his son. Jim in turn hugs Judy to him signifying that he in turn will be her support.³⁰

The music at the end mingled with police sirens underscores the bittersweet ending. Ironically the film ends at dawn with a shot of a man arriving at the planetarium which in the still dim light looks like a kind of mausoleum. Dawn marks the end of Plato's life, while at the same time marking a new beginning for Jim and Judy.

The film also ends at the site where a high school lecture has tried to convey the insignificance of man and the futility of his existence. In the harsh world of earth, the education received has no meaning. It does nothing to prepare teenagers to cope with problems in their life-- rather it trivializes them. While science may help explain

³⁰Ibid.

the workings of the physical universe, it does not here address crucial questions concerning preparation for adulthood which the high school students need to understand and cope with. Only in the streets while interacting with their peers is found the education that they will need in order to survive.

Blackboard Jungle and Rebel without a Cause created a prototype for the "teenage education" genre. Blackboard Jungle looked to the formal education system and specifically to a teacher-hero to provide the education that teenagers need during the high school years. Rebel without a Cause focused on the importance of informal education through peer learning and a student-hero who was left without adult guidance and support to make the transition into the adult world. From 1958 to 1961 other films followed, that along with Blackboard Jungle and Rebel without a Cause, established the "teenage education" genre.

CHAPTER 3

HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL TO THE EXPLOSIVE GENERATION:

COMPLETING THE "TEENAGE EDUCATION" PROTOTYPE

While Blackboard Jungle and Rebel without a Cause created a prototype for the movies of the 1980s, several films produced afterwards both mimic and further develop the "teenage education" genre. This chapter will look at films made for teenage audiences from 1958 to 1961 which complete the prototype. The importance of informal learning and social acceptance, the need for a sense of belonging, the emergence of a distinct teenage culture, the lack of communication with most adults--particularly fathers, and the failure of the school and the home to deal with the needs of the students are all ideas present in the following films that become a familiar part of the genre by the 1980s.

High School Confidential

High School Confidential, produced in 1958 by Albert Zugsmith and directed by Jack Arnold, combines elements from

both Blackboard Jungle and Rebel without a Cause. The setting is a spacious ivy covered high school in an affluent all white middle class neighborhood. The hero of the film is a male student. The scene is brightly lit and one has the feeling of openness and possibility, rather than confinement and depression as in Blackboard Jungle. The film addresses its targeted teenage audience by using a "rock 'n' roll" sound track. The music is played by Jerry Lee Lewis who appears in a pickup truck moving down the street by the school. The students in this co-ed institution are seen happily dancing together in the streets. There are no adults around, giving the feeling of being in a world dominated by teenagers. As the male student hero, Tony Baker, is introduced in a series of shots showing him taking over some one else's parking space and trying to pick up a girl, a portrait of a juvenile delinquent is communicated by his actions, as well as by his words. His use of the slang words like "drag," "pad," "rumble," and "top stud" are meant to signal that he is a part of the male teenage culture.¹

¹High School Confidential, 35 mm, 85 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Santa Monica, Calif., 1958.

The bad group in this high school is called the "Wheelers and Dealers." This group resembles the "Wheelers" in Rebel without a Cause, in that all the members are males. Unlike the gang members in Rebel without a Cause who dressed in leather jackets and jeans, or the gang members in Blackboard Jungle who signaled their belonging by wearing the same markings on their jackets, these gang members tend to blend in dress wise with the other high school students. The "Dealers" part of the name also indicates that they are involved in more than using cars for "chickie runs" and drag races. They are connected with dealing drugs. Juvenile delinquency is thus seen as entering another phase.

Tony Baker as the new transfer student from Northside High in Chicago sets himself up as a tough guy who can openly challenge the educational system--through both his constant use of slang and rude behavior to the school staff, principal and English teacher. This, along with his bad scholastic record, defines his filmic role as a juvenile delinquent.

Slang is used throughout the film to signify that the main character belongs to the teenage culture. The specific words chosen also help convey teenage attitudes about

education and society. When Tony asks where the "warden" is another student immediately understands he is asking about the principal. In response to being told about his poor academic record Tony replies: "So what. I'm no teacher's zombie." Later another student describes the English teacher as a "square bitch." The verbal message communicated is that the school is a prison. Learning is doing what a teacher asks--a simple following of orders without input just as a zombie does. Female teachers are not respected. They are seen in a very derogatory light conveyed by the use of the word "bitch." Furthermore the word "square" conveys that they are old fashioned--part of another culture.²

Even though the English teacher tries to communicate with the students and give slang some perspective by lecturing on how it has changed over time, she is immediately set apart from the students. Tony points out that the slang she is using is: "old style jive" and, therefore, belongs to the older generation. Teachers like her have a language barrier with their students, since both the denotative, as well as the connotative meanings of

²Ibid.

words, vary greatly between the adult and teenage cultures. When the story of Christopher Columbus is retold in slang by one of the students, the others respond enthusiastically. The words used colorfully and entertainingly retell a story that the students already know. Just as using a film in Blackboard Jungle establishes a way to reach students, so does the use of slang here illustrate some of its communication potential.³

In the middle class world portrayed in the film the acceptable language as stressed by the principal, Mr. Robinson is "plain English." The old, thin, balding and conservatively dressed man looks like a grandfatherly type. His words and actions communicate that he is a man who has had a great deal of experience and is extremely able to take charge. While Tony Baker tries everything to intimidate him from sitting in his chair smoking a cigarette to pointing a switchblade at him, the principal maintains control and firmly lays down the rules. Since Mr. Robinson is much shorter than Tony, the shots are carefully composed to show dominance. The principal upon entering his office is placed

³Ibid.

standing in the center of the frame looking down on Tony. At the point when Mr. Robinson is being threatened with a knife the two characters are centrally placed facing each other. As Mr. Robinson establishes control he remains standing in his center position. Tony at this point has moved to the opposite side of the screen and is again sitting. After Tony leaves the principal sits at his desk and folds his hands. While he has won one battle with Tony, he has yet to win the war.⁴

Tony, is presented as living at his aunt's house because he supposedly is an orphan. He drinks milk out of a bottle just as Jim did in Rebel without a Cause. In a home where he has access to alcohol, his choice of milk communicates nonverbally that he is not the juvenile delinquent that he seems to be at the high school. Also while he pretends to be a big stud out to date even his English teacher, his handling of his aunt's seductive advances show a much more mature attitude. Tony drops his use of slang as he asks his aunt who is dressed in a bathrobe: "Are you getting up or going to bed?" While his

⁴Ibid.

aunt bites into an apple he is holding as a way of getting close and arousing him, he like Mr. Robinson, calmly controls the situation leaving the aunt holding the apple as he leaves.⁵

Tony's aunt and the English teacher, Miss Williams, are clearly contrasted. While they both are blond and attractive, each is dressed in a very different way. Miss Williams wears a conservative dress that is closed at the neck. Her makeup is minimal and her hair is pulled back and up. Her movements are direct. Tony's aunt, on the other hand, dresses in flashy and revealing clothing that emphasizes her bust. Her hair, makeup, movements and even speech patterns are copies of Marilyn Monroe. Her part is most likely a way of putting a little sex in the film and giving Mamie Van Doren a role that would show off her physical attributes. Her character is the typical blonde "bimbo" who is obsessed with sex and having a good time. The fact that she is also a drinker who is bored with being just a housewife while her husband is away working, conveys the attitude that women cannot cope without men around.

⁵Ibid.

Caught in a time period when many women believed that their purpose in life was to be a housewife and faced with few career opportunities outside of office work, nursing and teaching, this character actually reflected a disturbing situation that many of the women had difficulty coping with.

The message of this film, however, was that the real problem in society was the introduction of drugs into the school system. In a scene beginning with a close-up shot of a cigarette and marijuana the voice on the screen instructs the viewers on how to spot the difference. Although the next shots show that the information is being conveyed to the high school teachers and principal, the beginning shot clearly indicates that the audience both inside and outside the film is being targeted with the information. The slang used by drug dealers and drug addicts is carefully explained so those not familiar with such code words as "Mary Jane" can no longer be fooled.⁶

The police commissioner warns the adults represented by teachers and principal about the seriousness of the drug problem, just as the prologue in Blackboard Jungle warned

⁶Ibid.

about the problem of juvenile delinquency. To persuade his audience he uses an example of a high school in Indiana. The location of the high school in the Midwest is to convince the audience that this is not a big city problem. Citing statistics he uses logical appeals to persuade the audience that it is a real danger. The danger of addiction to heroin and the spread of marijuana to elementary schools likens the drug problem to the spread of a disease. The further citing of how it has led to the death of a thirteen-year-old, adds the emotional appeal needed. The statement "It can happen here." tries to establish the needed connection. This scene, as a plot device to further the action and provide the audience with necessary information, works well.⁷

The scene also addresses an educational philosophy issue. As the principal points out he, as well as many others, believe in the "Progressive Theory" of education which he defines as believing "that there is no such thing as a bad boy or girl." Believing in the basic goodness of children predisposes the educational institution to act

⁷Ibid.

accordingly. Every child can be reached and taught the right things, because all children are capable of bettering themselves. The Police Commissioner, however, points out that adults having such a belief system will fail to recognize and deal with the drug issue which requires identifying and rooting out the bad seed before it is too late.⁸

The need to educate students about drugs is highlighted in several ways. Tony pokes fun at a girl named Mary Jane who doesn't understand that her name is slang for marijuana by stating: "Mary Jane's a crazy name. It just makes me frantic and I sure get my kicks from saying your name Mary Jane."⁹

Joan, a high school student, is seen being forced into the path of crime by participating in a scheme at a clothing store that overcharges her father on dresses she purchases and then gives her a cash kick back which she uses to buy drugs. Joan's high school friend, Doris, is seen having severe withdrawal attacks and serves as an example of how

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

marijuana can lead to heroin addiction. The tactics of pushers are revealed who play on the insecurities of students by calling them "chicken" if they do not want to try drugs. Then once pushers turn people on to drugs they show no mercy towards their victims--demanding their money before delivering any goods. For girls in particular the path to drugs is seen as the path to prostitution, as voiced by the main drug connection after Doris is shown writhing on a bed next to his office. He makes it clear that he will give her a fix only if she gives in to his demands:

Tough little broad. Still won't say yes. Try to tell that chick that no hop head ever becomes a lady. Just ain't in the cards. Told her I'd give her a fix if she'd join some girl friends. Nice little home upstate, but she wants to be a lady.¹⁰

The presentation in this scene is clearly aimed at adults. While the commissioner seems to be trying to convince the teachers that their beliefs about children are wrong, as the film later points out, it is often parents' beliefs about their children which are obstructive in dealing with the problem. Not all children are good. Drug addiction can happen in any community and involves all ages

¹⁰Ibid.

and classes.

When the commissioner later tries to meet with the parents on the drug issue, he gets little cooperation. Joan Staples, a student addicted to marijuana, looks like a sweet and innocent young girl. Her parents instantly believe her denial of any knowledge about drugs. Her father compares the idea of smoking marijuana to sneaking a drink during prohibition. It is something that adults get very upset about, but which doesn't result in anything bad. Using himself as an example of someone who was not harmed by sneaking alcohol, having become a happily married man with a successful business, he states: "So what's all the shouting about?" Ironically as he is defending his ideas he is preparing drinks for himself and his wife.¹¹

Joan Staples' parents are the only parents shown in the film and become the spokespeople for all the parents of teenagers. They are portrayed as rich with a large spacious home and swimming pool. They are well dressed in conservative clothes. Joan's father voices the belief that: "The only problem children have problem parents." Since he

¹¹Ibid.

does not see himself as a problem parent he refuses to believe that his daughter has a drug problem. It is obvious that he is unwilling to accept that his daughter is doing anything wrong and so denies the reality. Like many parents he does not want to see the truth and accept the responsibility of dealing with the problem. He also sees the attempts at informing the students about drugs as potentially dangerous because he believes that if this is done: "Kids will ask questions and become interested." Thus educating the children about drugs from his point of view will only succeed in creating an interest in drugs where there is none. Knowledge about some things is considered by parents like him as a dangerous thing.¹²

The position of Joan's mother is both visually and verbally communicated as weak and uninterested. She is seen seated, drink in hand and looking up approvingly at her husband as he speaks. There is no concern expressed about the situation. Rather her complete lack of interest is underscored as she states that she can not go to a school meeting on the issue, because she has to go to the Better

¹²Ibid.

Music Society.

Plot-wise and message-wise this scene is necessary to illustrate the lack of communication between parents and their children and the position that parents are likely to take and the arguments that they will use to justify their attitudes. Unlike Blackboard Jungle which starts out addressing itself to adults, this film begins to address the adults more subtly within the context of the film, leaving the direct approach for the conclusion. It is to this end that one police officer enlightens another about what to expect from parents when Mr. Staples lays blame on the police as he bails his daughter, Joan, out of jail after a drug bust. The officer states:

You see Staples is no exception. The other parents will soon be here jumping all over us. Not my child. Oh no. It's a horrible mistake. They won't believe the truth because they don't want to until it's too late. Then they'll call us bums because we didn't warn them in time.¹³

The social meeting place for the students is a kind of club that does not seem well thought out visually and which is there as a plot necessity. The waiter in white jacket and shirt would be more appropriate in an adult club. The

¹³Ibid.

"beat" poetry recited by a young girl to the accompaniment of a piano also seems out of place and more fitting in a college coffee house scene of the period. Her verbal message, however, is directed towards the teenagers by using slang to communicate to them. What is said reflects a very pessimistic and negative attitude towards life and the older generation. She characterizes her father as one who saved money and wound up with only an old car, TV and arthritis. Her ivy league uncle also had a dismal end coughing up blood. "Tomorrow is a drag." is the recurring message. The only remedy for getting through today is to "swing with a . . . chick, turn on to a thousand joys" and "turn your eyes inside and dig the vacuum." Thus as she points out the futility of life, she also gives the students a way of tuning out what is happening by turning on and tuning in to themselves. Her message is that using drugs will help teenagers cope by mentally removing them from the problems in their lives.¹⁴

When we later realize that this place is a distribution center for drugs, this girl's message takes on

¹⁴Ibid.

added meaning. The piano player that accompanies her is the main connection (Mr. A). She is a vehicle to communicate to other teenagers. Her white middle class rap is thus used to influence the teenagers listening and give them a more receptive attitude towards using drugs.

After the audience learns that Tony is a police plant to flush out the main drug dealer, his selection of special words revolve around the language drug dealers use to communicate with each other. By this time the audience has been supplied with enough information that most will be able to make sense out of the dialogue. The drug culture is seen as having its own language and specific beliefs, values and attitudes. Users are believed to be untrustworthy and therefore are blocked from reaching high positions in the drug world. They are the lower class. Women, in particular, are thought of as having loose morals once they become drug users. Upper class means to not indulge in any drugs, including alcohol. Loyalty is an important value.

In contrast to Mr. A and his goals to corrupt youth is the English teacher, Arlene Williams, who despite Tony's rudeness and getting into trouble, continues to believe in him. It is essential that she do so, because at a critical

point in time she is the only one whom he can trust to take care of Joan who loses control and is a potential threat to completing his undercover bust. Unfortunately Miss Williams is never given any real way of being effective. The best she can do is comfort a crying Joan who is calling for her father as Tony's drunk aunt looks on.

The drug bust is an all boy affair. Another teenage group introduced earlier in the film as being made up mainly of football players (aptly named the Rangers) comes to Tony's rescue. There is an old fashioned shoot out and fist fight pitting the good guys against the bad. To satisfy the moral code of the time the good guys win.

The epilogue of the film is used to deliver the moral message to the audience. As it is worded, the targeted receivers are adults. Using the Police Commissioner's male voice and speaking in a very authoritative manner the film tells the audience that:

You have just seen an authentic disclosure of conditions which unfortunately exist in some of our high schools today . . . Arlene will teach in a school that has cleansed itself of its ugly problem . . . The job of policemen like Mike Watson (Tony Baker) will not be finished until this insidious menace to the schools of our

country is exposed and destroyed.¹⁵

Joan is to only smoke cigarettes, and the aunt has been satisfied by the return of her husband. During the course of this voice over narration we see these characters in a car with a California license plate. All are happy. Agnes is passionately embracing her husband, and Tony, now dressed in a conservative dark suit, is driving the car and looking straight ahead.

Like Blackboard Jungle, the ending is a happy one with a resolution presented to the problem in the film. Unlike Blackboard Jungle, it removes the cause of the problem from a poor multicultural urban male environment where teenagers are left unsupervised because both parents have to work to an affluent white suburban and co-ed environment with parents involved in their own professional and social activities, but believing that they are doing a good job in raising their children. The gangs and heroes are males. Women like Mrs. Dadier and Arlene see the goodness in students despite all that happens. Teachers who try to reach their students succeed. Communicating in a language

¹⁵Ibid.

that the students can understand is of value.

The Cool and the Crazy

The Cool and the Crazy, which was also produced in 1958 by E.C. Rhoden and directed by William Whitney, depicted the problem of teenage drug addiction among white middle class males. Both its prologue and epilogue contain messages to parents about the problem. A disclaimer, however, is made about the incidents in the film calling them not typical and subject to dramatic license. Also the audience is told that the film is "not meant to give adequate solutions to the drug problem." In general the film is technically and artistically poorly made, giving little insight into characters and situations. It uses the already popular combination of drugs, a white male gang and juvenile delinquency. Its title is meant to appeal to teenagers. Although there are some slang words used in the film, its dialogue could be easily understood by all ages.¹⁶

The high school is shown as large and clean with plenty of grass and trees around. Everyone is middle class

¹⁶The Cool and the Crazy, 35 mm, 78 min., American-International, Los Angeles, Calif., 1958.

white. The students are nicely dressed and orderly. Clothing-wise everyone blends in with each other. The only classroom shown is an English one with a conservatively dressed woman, Miss Ryan, as the teacher. As she asks the students to explain the subjunctive she comes up against the protagonist, Ben. He has already been established as a loner sitting under a tree playing with a knife and entering the school after all the other students. Also his carrying a note to the teacher in his mouth suggests an attitude of rebelliousness against an authority figure. In talking with Miss Ryan he tells her that he is stupid and has been kicked out of other schools. Then in more adult language he pokes fun at sociological ideas as he says: "I'm a product of a very complex society and I'm having a real tough time making an adjustment."¹⁷

Miss Ryan tries to talk to Ben telling him that she knows of his reform school background. Like the English teacher, Arlene, in High School Confidential she is willing to help her student. Ben, however, is not a good person pretending to be bad. He is depicted as bad and takes the

¹⁷Ibid.

teacher's concern as a sign of weakness. Her mistake is visually made clear as she sits in a student chair next to him, putting herself on the same horizontal plane. For Ben this is the opportunity to put her down by telling her they could become better acquainted if they went out for some beer. Despite the fact that he leaves when she orders him out, it is clear by the way she looks and her body posture that she no longer feels confident.

The school is depicted as playing no real role in educating the students. Ben represents the teenagers who are generally isolated from the adult world and believe adults are "phonies and professional dogooders" as he does. The teenage attitude towards adults is thus: "We're better than they are. Who needs them." With such a negative attitude towards adults a teacher can do little.¹⁸

What the film quickly reveals is that Ben is slightly crazy and not thinking clearly because he is on marijuana. The background music and some of his body movements are like imitations of James Dean in Rebel without a Cause. He also is shown as alienated from the other students and his

¹⁸Ibid.

father. Unfortunately not enough information is supplied to give the audience an inside look at the motivations of this character.

It becomes clear that Ben is being used by a drug dealer to get other teenagers hooked on drugs. He is already in a weak position, however, because he is a user, rather than just a seller. This is coupled by a scene showing his father, who is sloppily dressed in a T-shirt and drinking beer while reading a paper. The room is a mess. Ben is dressing to go out, and all his father does is ask Ben to get him a six pack. Ben's reaction is to voice his attitude about the appearance of his father and conclude that because of the way that he dresses he is a flunky and will never be anything else. Only in a brief moment when Ben picks up his father's bottle of beer that has dropped and gently wipes the top do we have any indication that he wants to communicate with his father, but can't.

In order to ingratiate himself with a group of high school boys for the purpose of selling them dope, Ben tries to prove himself by going to a police station and asking to have himself locked up. The police are shown as not being taken in by his antics. The boys, however, are easily

swayed. After a couple of beers from Ben they talk about their problems which range from not having fun anymore to complaining about being gotten up by mother every morning. The only person who sees that there is something wrong with Ben at this point is Stu who already has stated that Ben is crazy. Stu wants to know who is sponsoring all the free beer Ben is giving out. Unfortunately the portrayal of Stu, who is the supposed gang leader, is of a youth caught between the world of the child and the adult world without clear guidance. He complains that "We're not men and we're not boys. They treat us like kids and then expect us to act like grownups." The dialogue indicates his vulnerability and signals to Ben that he is ripe for the picking. Thus Stu is offered a joint and proceeds to get high.¹⁹

Stu's attitude towards the adult world is further revealed in the following club scene where the gang goes to dance. Stu brings in a stop sign and treats it like a person. In a gesture reminiscent of Jim in Rebel without a Cause, he puts his coat lovingly over the cross arms on the sign saying: "You're cold. . . . I love you. You don't step

¹⁹Ibid.

on me. Everybody else steps on me." Stu also bangs his head against a table saying he has to crawl into the woodwork. What is being communicated by dialogue and visuals is that Stu feels insignificant in an adult world--a terrifying world for which he is unprepared. Inside is a young child wanting to hide under the covers of his bed in a secure and well known world.²⁰

Stu and all but one of his gang members, Jackie, are shown having extreme addictive reactions to smoking marijuana. They appear hung over and ready to do anything for another joint. Their reactions are summed up in expressions like: "I want to die."; "Got an ice pick in my brain and someone is twisting it," to "I feel like the Sahara dessert--all thirsty." One member, Cookie, gets a gun and threatens to rob a gas station for money because he says that he feels like his insides are falling apart and he has to buy more drugs. Both the character movement of the gang members and the dialogue are exaggerated reactions to what is presumably a one time smoking of marijuana. What the film communicates would be more appropriate for users of

²⁰Ibid.

hard drugs like heroin. The intended message is very clear. Do drugs and you will feel horrible and no longer control your life.²¹

There is a total absence of parental involvement up to this point in the film. Ben's father seems not to care and nothing is said about his reform school experience. The only normal seeming parents shown are those of Jackie's newly acquired girlfriend, Amy. Their house looks comfortable and as Jackie keeps commenting, "clean." Jackie discloses that his father has been a circus performer so that they have traveled a great deal. Now his father does nothing. No mention is made of his mother. Jackie's attitude does not convey anything negative, so we are left to assume that his relationship with his father is good. This provides a basis for making Jackie worthy of being saved.²²

Amy, the only important female teenager in the film, is shown as being self-confident and mature. Her dress is very conservative, and she confesses that she does not go

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

out much. When she invites Jackie into her house she is perfectly at ease, while Jackie moves about nervously wondering if he should be there. Amy is also extremely at ease with the arrival of her parents who never question her judgement at inviting a boy in. The warmth of their relationship is visually communicated by the mother putting her hand on Amy's shoulder and smiling. We also learn later that Jackie has been continuing to see Amy and they have gone to church together. Amy, the wholesome teenager, relates well to the adult world because she has a warm loving relationship with her parents. She also probably has good moral values because she goes to church.

Ben is the bad seed who corrupts others. Without a sound home life, he falls in with bad company in the form of Eddie the drug dealer who turns out to be no father substitute. Instead Eddie is a user who expects Ben to be grateful because he has bought him some clothes and promises him money for selling drugs. While the drug dealer sees money as something to be highly valued, it is not something that can fulfill Ben's needs. His drug addiction indicates that he is using drugs for a greater need. During the final confrontation scene with Eddie, Ben can no longer

differentiate between the real world and his own crazy thoughts as he cries out: "Don't hit me pop. You buy anything with money. That's what you said. . . . If I'm a good boy I get a blue star." The dialogue suggests that Ben wants a loving father. He has taken the wrong path because he has been taught that there is great value in the acquisition of money. The way to be a good boy and get his father's approval is by having money. The film reinforces a cultural belief that the desire for money can lead to evil. Money corrupts those who do not have warm and loving parents to instill good values.²³

The second English classroom scene provides a clear contrast to the concerns of the students and their serious problems. While some of the students are dealing with drug addiction, Miss Ryan continues to ask them to define the subjunctive. As a token effort to communicate with them she okays the use of street dialect and tries to reach them by saying: "I'm going to try to be a great guy." Not only does what she say sound very phoney, but what she is asking for seems to have no relevance for them. Unable to communicate

²³Ibid.

with the students, she cannot teach them. Her teaching deals with things which are not part of the students' reality. Ironically the only person who can define what she is asking for is Ben. He tells her:

Subjunctive mood represents something that isn't actually in the domain of reality. It exists only in the mind of the speaker, with more or less hope of realization. Or in the case of a statement, with little or no hope.²⁴

By answering her question, Ben shows that he is not stupid. Rather he is a smart teenager with no sense of direction. Showing up the teacher makes him feel important.

All Ms. Ryan does is stand by while things happen. Even though she should see that one of the students has a drug problem, she remains at a distance from either lack of knowledge or inability to act. Her role as a bystander is more clearly illustrated as she watches Cookie desperately ask Jackie for help in obtaining money for more drugs. She is again shown in a brief shot outside the police station when Ben is later brought in for questioning regarding Cookie's death during a hold up. Since nothing about her appearance is said, the shot of her would make the audience

²⁴Ibid.

assume that she would have indicated something to the police about what she knew concerning the connection between Cookie and Ben.

The message of the film is clearly aimed at disclosing the perils of drug addiction. Not only does marijuana make you feel awful, but it also leads to violence and death. Cookie is killed trying to steal money to buy more. Ben kills Eddie when he realizes his connection is being terminated. In the end Ben also is killed when taking drugs makes him crazy enough to go into the other lane of traffic. As his car goes over a steep embankment and bursts into flames, he dies in a burst of fire (reminiscent of Rebel without a Cause).

The only gang member who remains clear of marijuana is Jackie. Although he steals a statue to help get money for his friend, Cookie, Stu breaks the statue before it can be sold. Even when Ben gives him a joint for free, Jackie does not smoke it. Instead he goes to Amy for help telling her: "This is dope. This is what killed Cookie." As Amy tears up the joint she tells Jackie: "They're bad. You call them your friends, but you're not like them." Amy thus provides the support needed. She can reach Jackie because she is on

his level--another teenager to whom he can talk.²⁵

While Amy and her mother are portrayed positively, other references to women connote negative attitudes. It is a mother whom we are told always gets one of the gang members out of bed. The police tell Ben to go home to his mother. Later the police lieutenant calls Ben "mama's little boy," when he looks as if he will cry. Miss Ryan, called a "dumb bitch" by Ben, is portrayed as a conservative English teacher who is removed from her students. It is basically a man's world where women are secondary. Their acceptability depends on the degree to which they can help the men.²⁶

The ending contains a very moralistic message from the police officer who tells the teenagers at the crash site: ". . . Look at this. Come on son look at it. It could have been anyone of you. Is this what you call kicks? If you don't wise up you're all going to end up like this one way or another."²⁷

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

Thus the police are given once again the role of telling society about the perils of drug addiction and juvenile delinquency. They verbalize the message that the film is supposed to convey: "to raise the guard of teenagers and their parents against lawful perils of narcotic addiction." In comparison to High School Confidential this film does not see the school as taking any active role in dealing with the problem. Thus a critical issue remains as part of informal learning, to be dealt with by parties outside the high school environment.²⁸

High School Hellcats

A third film produced in 1958 by James H. Nicholson and Samuel Arkoff and directed by Edward L. Bernds, High School Hellcats, gives another view of teenagers and problems of juvenile delinquency. The film centers on the female perspective by concerning itself with an all female gang, the Hellcats, living in an affluent white middle class area in California. All the members dress and for the most part act like normal teenage girls of the time. The leader, Connie and her best friend Dolly are established as

²⁸Ibid.

rebellious by smoking in a school bathroom with a no smoking sign prominently displayed. Dolly is the only one shown with a tendency towards violence as she throws a knife at the door.

The high school is large with ornamental trim. It is clean and white with plenty of space and vegetation around. The one classroom shown in the film looks comfortable and organized with writing on the board. It contains a segregated female class on health and hygiene. The general disrespect for teachers is quickly established by the harassment of an older conservatively dressed male substitute teacher who runs to the principal's office for help after a student begins throwing books.

The main character, Joyce Martin, a new girl in school, is approached by the Hellcats and quickly shows her need to belong. In the words of the leader, Connie, their meeting place is a home away from home. It is soon clear that tensions in Joyce's home with her father make her want to get away. As she later states: "If we had the right kind of homes we wouldn't have to go out and find another one. If our parents showed some real interest in us." The Hellcats are thus depicted as a basically nice group of

teenagers whose needs are not being met at home so they band together. They rebel against adult authority by drinking, smoking, stealing and doing poorly in school.²⁹

The problem in Joyce's home is her father. Like Judy's father in Rebel without a Cause, Joyce's cannot cope with the fact that his daughter is becoming a woman. He constantly tells her she has on too much lipstick and objects to her wearing tight sweaters. While the mother is portrayed as understanding, the father is always objecting to her defending her daughter, and she is told not to argue with him. Despite the fact that Joyce's mother continues to defend her and has a good relationship with her daughter, it is clear that the person that Joyce needs to communicate with is her father. After an argument with her father who states that he doesn't understand why kids are always trying to act grownup, Joyce tells him: "I hardly ever see you and when I do you don't have time to talk."³⁰

The other female adult who has a good rapport with Joyce and fellow members of the Hellcats is the Health and

²⁹High School Hellcats, 35 mm, 68 min., American-International, Los Angeles, Calif., 1958.

³⁰Ibid.

Physical Education teacher, Miss Davis. Portrayed as young, attractive, with a warm smile and dressing more like her students by wearing a sweater, skirt and jacket, she is well liked by her students and in complete control of her classroom. When Connie tries to address her as "Teach" she counters by calling Connie "you." She thus communicates that she will not tolerate any disrespect, but at the same time does it in a way that does not provoke the students. Miss Davis is very sympathetic towards the students and sees them in a positive light. In turn the students respect her and feel that they can trust her. She looks and acts like a big sister figure with whom they feel they can even discuss the subject of boys.³¹

The other important character in the film is Mike Landers. He is portrayed as an orphaned hard working college student who goes to school at night to become an electronic engineer. The value that education has for him is contrasted with Joyce's attitude. As the only child of a lawyer she goes to school because it is required. She does not see school as necessary and her future is summed up in

³¹Ibid.

"Someday I'll get married."³²

Joyce's conflict with her father and her attitude towards school make her an easy target for the Hellcats who also do not value education. As Connie states, they don't like eggheads nor teacher's pets. Those who need to pass should do so only with D's. It is their way of rebelling against adult authority. While they can't do very much about their parents, they can make choices about how well they do in school. Their drinking of alcohol and stealing also expresses their rebellion against the adult world. It is their cry for help. The club is their artificial home. As Joyce states to Mike: "I'm sick of people giving orders." Joyce, like Stu in The Cool and the Crazy, is caught between the world of the child and that of the adult. What her father fails to recognize is something Joyce's mother clearly sees--that Joyce needs to be allowed to grow up and that she has rights, as well as responsibilities. Children need to be treated with respect in order to show it. Joyce, like Judy in Rebel without a Cause, also finds someone that she can love and depend on. A sound relationship is again

³²Ibid.

crucial to making the transition to adulthood.³³

The film establishes the basic goodness of Joyce by showing that she is not a real thief when she pays for earrings she is supposed to steal, not liking to drink alcohol nor being promiscuous by her warding off unwanted advances by the boys at a party Connie arranges. Then when Connie is murdered, Joyce turns to her teacher, Miss Davis, for help. Miss Davis' belief in the basic goodness of the members of the Hellcats is reaffirmed when two other girls go to her for help, realizing that Joyce may be in danger. Miss Davis is the one adult who can talk to both the students and the parents. She is able to call Joyce's parents and notify the police for help. At the end she also becomes instrumental in paving the way for Mike to be accepted by Joyce's parents as she informs them that he is a nice boy and can help Joyce.

When Joyce and Mike arrive at Joyce's home in the last scene the belief in the value of a strong and loving family is visually presented. Her parents welcome them both. In particular her father opens his arms out to Mike as he

³³Ibid.

escorts him into the house. Joyce and Mike thus achieve what is necessary to have a happy ending. They are good people who come home to a warm loving family.

Like Blackboard Jungle and High School Confidential, this film looks at the high school experience as one where given the right support can make a difference in the lives of some of the students. The role of the teacher who believes in his/her students is of value. This film, however, also exhibits some differences. The main characters are mostly women--Joyce, her mother and Miss Davis. While Joyce's mother speaks rationally and treats her daughter with trust and respect, she is shown as remaining respectful of her husband who voices his authority and tells her not to argue with him. She thus is a good wife, as well as, a mother. Miss Davis also maintains her position as being a good teacher who is respected by her students and plays the additional role of being a friend. Her moving outside of her formal teaching role allows her to be the advocate that the high school students need to help them cope with the world of their parents as they try to establish their independence from both peer and parental pressures.

The significance of men, however, is still seen as important. Joyce, no matter how supportive her mother is, feels that she has no home without her father's understanding. In turn Mike as a college student is someone who at the end of the film we are told will help her cope with what has happened. While the film seems to have a happy ending it must be noted that just as Joyce was not able to talk to her father, she did not disclose the truth about Connie's death to Mike after it happened. This indicates that while trust between the women exist, this is not necessarily so between the men and women. It takes a caring teacher like Miss Davis who goes beyond her role in a school setting to bring all the people together and open up the lines of communication between them.

High School Caesar

High School Caesar, made in 1960, goes back to previous films for its ideas and incorporates several elements from Rebel without a Cause. The film, however, is clearly a B rated feature whose purpose was to draw in a teenage audience. It exploits the subject of juvenile delinquency and violence. Characterization is one

dimensional with little insight into the characters.

When the film begins we see a group of leather jacketed teenage hoodlums beating up a fellow student. Given the code restrictions of the time the violence is confined to one punch to the head with no show of blood or bruises. The gang leader, Brad, is a well dressed and groomed young man who runs an on-campus protection racket. By his dress and manner of speaking and acting it is clear that he is in a social class above the others. The protection racket is only part of his scheme of things to control the student body. He values power and is interested in becoming student body president.

Brad in some ways resembles the character of Plato in Rebel without a Cause. He is very rich, living in a large white home set on spacious grounds. He has a white maid who takes care of him and a butler to do his bidding. His parents are not there. According to the maid they are always traveling. As the film progresses it is made very clear that Brad, like Plato, desperately needs his father. While acting tough to the outside world he is really a small frightened boy inside. The only person who cares about him is his maid, who tells the butler that Brad is not what he

seems to be. Brad, on the other hand, also shows some feeling towards her when he kids around with her about how well she looks.

Brad drives around in his father's white cadillac, role playing an adult by acting tough. Since his father is rich, Brad greatly values the acquisition of money. It is his key to power and to fulfill his need of being liked by his peers. In the school setting, students come to him and do his bidding. He appears cool and in control. Upon becoming student body president, he offers to buy all the students coke, using the students' own money to pay the cost. Money also buys the loyalty of his hoods. He pays them for all their services. Even in his relationship with Cricket, who is his only friend, money is used to maintain it. When he fails to deliver on a promise to set Cricket up for a date with a new girl in school, Brad tries to smooth over the problem by boosting his percentage of the take from the extortion money. What he fails to realize is that Cricket's value system is much different than his own. Money will not buy affection. Social bonding through dating has more value for teenagers like Cricket.

While Brad, in comparison to the insecure and socially

inept Cricket, appears in control, he is portrayed as the most vulnerable and alone. Arriving home and seeing a chandelier mysteriously shaking he calls out to his maid and butler. Finding himself alone he flees to his room. Later he is shown distraught upon opening an envelope from his father (again a parallel with the character of Plato). Inside is only a check instead of a letter. His attempts to reach his father by phone also fail.

The only significant connection with his father is a gold piece that his father once gave him. He is shown handling it with great care and making a point to let others know that it was from his father. Ironically the coin, like the check he receives, shows the use of money as the main symbol of affection. The coin is no substitute for a father's presence. The pursuit of money carries the seeds of destruction. Just as his father's business interests leave Brad without an adult role model to help him cope with the world around him, so Brad's pursuit of the coin that he loses in a drag race, ultimately destroys him. Like Plato at the end of Rebel without a Cause, Brad finds himself alone. While he cries out to his father for help he is caught in a circle of light marking the end of his world.

The camera is placed high above showing Brad hunched over on the ground all alone in his universe.

Most of the scenes in the film seem very artificial. The school is devoid of teachers and staff. Only the middle-aged conservatively dressed white principal seems to be present. He looks like a clean cut nice guy who has some concern about finding out about who's behind the extortions at school. He is portrayed as naive, however, and is easily manipulated by Brad whose student girlfriend works in the principal's office.

The Wagon, the student hangout, looks like a set. Most of the shots are done from the same angles and at a distance so there is very little connection made between the characters and the audience. The dialogue is also stiff and reveals little about any of the characters.

Clothing and characterization are used to differentiate the good and bad students. The gang members wear leather jackets and are more sloppily dressed. Brad's girlfriend has dark hair and generally wears dark clothing. She acts and talks tough. Outside of the leader, Brad, the male members talk and act as if they are not very intelligent. Cricket cannot figure out what 10 percent of

an amount is. The attitude being conveyed is that those who become gang members are likely to be lower class, insecure and less intelligent.

In contrast the good students dress in clean conservative clothing. They are together because they want to be together. Their conversation indicates that they are intelligent and fairly secure. Wanda, the new student, is portrayed as a blonde who wears white--representing purity. She refuses to accept a date with Cricket and is neither intimidated nor attracted to Brad and his power.

The only fairly realistic sequence in the film deals with a drag race. What is enacted is a kind of macho rite which filmmakers by this time have incorporated into their films as part of the teenage film genre. While the outdoor setting is realistic and there are some nice shots of the cars battling for position, there are no close-up shots of the faces of the drivers. Looking at shots of cars driving by removes the audience from a sense of the feelings of the drivers. Having no emotional stake in the action makes the race meaningless.

The drag race is more a plot device to wrest Brad of his beloved gold piece and lead to his action of following

the winner and forcing him off the road in an effort to get the gold piece back. While the film does not state it clearly the retrieval of the gold is tied to selling one's soul for money. To get money one must do evil. The Christian belief that money is the root of all evil is embedded in our culture and also in the film. The name Caesar in the title of the film is a device to not only connect the character of Brad to the idea of an autocratic ruler and his subsequent demise, but also to make a connection with passages in the Bible, wherein Christ is betrayed for money and the statement by Christ to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

Brad in the end, like Caesar and Plato, is without anyone to turn to for help. They all are truly alone. To also highlight the sense of abandonment felt by Brad and Plato is the proximity of their demise to their birthdays. Plato dies the day after his birthday and Brad's part in the killing of his fellow student is revealed on his birthday, causing everyone to leave his party. Birthdays in American society are particularly important and highly valued. They are meant to be happy occasions when family and friends gather around and celebrate the beginnings of an individual.

Not having these people around on such an occasion thus destroys the feelings of significance that a person has and isolates him from society.

Brad, unlike Joyce in High School Hellcats, cannot even turn to anyone in the school for help. His position as Student Body President is based on power and not on any real connection with the students or teachers. Even the principal shows little understanding of the students and remains at a distance from them. The high school is thus portrayed as having little positive influence on the lives of the students. The absence of a strong school presence in the film mirrors the absence of parental authority in the home. Brad is without guidance. He exploits the educational environment to gain money and power thus learning the skills needed to exploit the outside world when he enters adulthood. The educational environment cannot provide him with what he most needs and wants--a strong and loving family.

The Explosive Generation

The Explosive Generation, produced in 1961 by Stanley Colbert and directed by Buzz Kulik, moves away from the

focus on juvenile delinquency and concentrates on the more positive role of a high school and the educational connections between the teachers, students and parents. While a few black students appear as part of a crowd in several shots, all the main action and characters revolve around a white middle class world. Jefferson High is set in an affluent Beverly Hills neighborhood. It is a large clean school where students blend with each other both in the way they dress and the way they look.

The first scene of a basketball game with cheerleaders and a responsive crowd depicts a well ordered environment. The victory celebration party with beer and "rock 'n' roll" music shows the potential for excess, but is a relatively short scene. Janet, Dan, Bobbie and Margie are introduced as typical teenagers enjoying themselves on a date. They are wholesome looking and nicely, but conservatively dressed. Everyone is basically good. Even when the two girls lie to their mothers about where they are staying overnight, nothing happens with their boyfriends. The morning after the party Janet and her steady Dan are shown fully dressed, with Janet sleeping on the couch and Dan on the floor. Janet's first concern upon waking is getting to

school on time.

The administration, teachers and students portrayed inside the high school appear to be all white. The main teacher, Mr. Gifford, is dressed in a knit sports shirt and suit making him look less formal than the other teachers. As he walks to his class greeting the students he is shown as friendly and easy to communicate with. When he asks for students to discuss current senior problems, he urges them to think for themselves. His openness quickly invites Janet to ask about discussing the problem of sex. This raises the question of what subjects are the responsibility of the parents and what should be taught in the schools. The comments of the students and their need to discuss the question of sex makes it obvious that not only is this something very important to them, but that it is not something that is being dealt with properly in the home.

The comments of Mr. Gifford's fellow teacher and the actions of the parents make it clear that Mr. Gifford crosses the line of propriety by what he does--allowing students to write questions relating to sex that are to be read and discussed in class. It is likened to committing a sin when he departs from "ordained curriculum to do it."

The students are thought of as "the little ones" whose opinions don't matter. The teachers, like the parents, do not see the students as mature enough to discuss such personal matters with them. Instead, as Mr. Gifford's fellow teacher points out, teachers should stick to "reading and writing." Gifford is told that he is not a parent and therefore has a limited say in the lives of his students. On the other hand, Gifford points out that a teacher takes on a parental role in a classroom.³⁴

The lack of communication between parents and children becomes a crucial aspect in this film. While the students try to talk to their parents, it is clear that their opinions are not respected. There is the repetition of the idea from The Cool and the Crazy that teenagers are supposed to act mature, but are treated as small children who do not know what is good for them.

The parents are portrayed as affluent middle class. Janet's father likes to golf, her mother is president of the PTA and in general has a strong personality. Bobbie Herman's father is a car dealer who is concerned about money

³⁴The Explosive Generation, 35 mm, 87 min., United Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1961.

and is portrayed as a hypocrite. While seemingly concerned about the morality issue he is shown taking a drink and later sitting on a couch with an attractive woman, after leaving work on the pretense of feeling ill. Margie Ryker's mother is shown as a woman dependent upon her husband, who doesn't know how to cope with a situation when he is not around. Lastly, there is Dan's father, who while seemingly going along with the general reactions of the parents, in the end allows his son to take the actions necessary to deal with the problems that develop when Mr. Gifford is accused of improper conduct in allowing the students to discuss the subject of sex in his classroom.

Generally the attitude of the parents is one of denial of any wrongdoing on the part of their children. As Mr. Herman states: "Whatever has happened is due to the influence of that dreadful Mr. Gifford. We raise fine kids. They hear those things in school and the teachers encourage them." The parents believe that teachers must control what goes on in the classroom and not give in to the students who are just "a bunch of kids still wet behind the ears."³⁵

³⁵Ibid.

Mr. Morton, the principal, is portrayed as middle-aged and conservatively dressed. While he is sympathetic to Mr. Gifford he also points out that students should not be given a choice in what subjects to discuss because they cannot be trusted with making the wisest choices. He sees his role in the controversy as being a politician, public relations person and mediator, rather than an educator. From the position that he takes and the strong emotional reactions of the parents, it is very clear that sex is extremely important and highly valued in American society. It is also a subject about which both teenagers and parents have difficulty communicating.

Mr. Gifford is more than a teacher to the students. He is a friend and in a way a pseudo father figure whom the students feel will take their side as they struggle against the authority of their parents. When Gifford refuses to betray them even at the cost of his job, they see him as an ideal role model.

The students boycott the school to assert their rights to the papers they have written in Mr. Gifford's class and also to have some choice in the subjects being taught in the high school. They follow what Mr. Gifford has taught them

in school--to ask questions and think for themselves. In a society that values independence and is supposed to educate students to become critical thinkers and discerning citizens, the students take the first step to remove themselves from what they see as the tyranny of their parents by asserting their rights.

The school is depicted as being a conservative institution that must uphold the status quo. It, like Mr. Morton, is not prepared to handle any departure from the norm. The idea that students have rights is seen as a kind of heresy. Mr. Gifford is targeted as being responsible for the boycott, just as he was for discussing sex in the classroom. Mr. Morton attacks him for his creative teaching methods, which means that he departed from the prescribed curriculum. Independent action on what should be taught is seen as dangerous. The film is thus making a comment on what the high school should be teaching. Is it to make identical parts as in an automobile factory?--a criticism made by Mr. Gifford to his fellow teacher. Or is it to encourage students to ask questions and think for

themselves?³⁶

Unlike the suggestion in the title that there is some kind of explosion, the students' protest is not violent in any way. Mr. Gifford sees the students' willingness to stand up for their rights by not attending school as a very positive step. He tells Mr. Morton that they are following in the footsteps of other students in other parts of the world who had the guts to stand up for their beliefs. He expresses the attitude that silence is apathy and not something to be valued in a democratic society. Those not willing to speak out are condemned to live under the tyranny of others.

When the students are confronted with the possibility of violence by opposing the police, the film cleverly uses the idea of beating authority at its own game by playing by the imposed rules. Since they are treated like children, the students proceed to follow the order they are given--to be seen but not heard. Their silence in school portrays a world of lifeless robots who go through the motions of doing what they are told, but without any human interaction taking

³⁶Ibid.

place. This is even more clearly portrayed at the basketball game at the end where in contrast to the beginning of the film, there is now no response from the students. The film thus visually sends a message on what society would be like if students had no say in their life.

There is a linking at the end between the school, the parents and the teachers. While the students win the right to freedom of speech for themselves and the teachers from Mr. Morton, it is something that he points out the school cannot guarantee without the approval of the parents. The parents are thus portrayed as a vital link in the educational system. Without everyone in agreement it doesn't work. The key to obtaining the agreement is by exercising the rights one wants--the students have to speak up in order to obtain the right to speak for themselves. Just as the students have to communicate with the school about what they want, they must also do so directly with their parents. Both Dan and Janet communicate with one of their parents and secure their understanding. Dan convinces his father that he has to fight for what he believes in order to have confidence in himself. Janet on the other hand conveys to her mother the idea that in order to make

mature decisions she needs her mother's help and that is only possible if the two of them can communicate on a more adult level.

In the end the teacher's role is seen as very important. The students ask Mr. Gifford not to resign from his position saying: "Being able to change things is a big responsibility and we would all feel better if you were here keeping us from making too many mistakes." Gifford is now wearing a suit and tie. He is visually elevated to a leadership position and is dressed for the occasion. When the principal brings him the file containing the disputed student papers, his rights to teach the students are thus sanctioned by the administration. The school is once again restored to its crucial position in a democratic society by preparing the students to peacefully assert their guaranteed rights as citizens. Education's importance within the school setting is thus affirmed and the vital link between school, home and teenage education is maintained.³⁷

The films about high school education from 1955 to 1961 mainly depict a white middle class world. It is a world

³⁷Ibid.

threatened by juvenile delinquency and the spread of drugs. In contrast to the environmentalist view that such problems arise out of poverty as in Blackboard Jungle, the remainder of the films see these problems present at every class level. Neither city nor suburban schools are free from their spread. With the addition of peer pressure at the high school level, high schools are portrayed as breeding grounds for these problems which can eventually infect the outside world.

The high school is generally not the place where students can learn those things which would help them deal with the transition from childhood into the adult world. Teaching the subjunctive when students seem to have no real purpose in life makes education look ludicrous. Nor do the films tend to stress the importance of a high school education in order to go to college. There is only one mention of going to college made by Dan in The Explosive Generation. The female students, like Joyce in High School Hellcats and Janet in The Explosive Generation, instead are looking forward to getting married. The only school that presents students with subjects that will be helpful for dealing with life after high school is the vocational high

school in Blackboard Jungle. Since the urban poor students that attend it are not likely to continue their education, classes like shop and English are geared to help them get a job.

Principals are depicted as white, middle-aged, conservative, middle class men. They seem to be concerned about their schools but take no active part in the educational aspects other than in matters such as the hiring and firing of teachers. As Mr. Morton points out in The Explosive Generation their role is more of a politician and public relations person.

The roles played by teachers range from the nonexistent in some of the films to being important father figures and friends in others. All the teachers are white and the most important ones tend to be male. The two positively portrayed female teachers, Arlene in High School Confidential and Miss Davis in High School Hellcats, are shown as young and attractive.

Mr. Dadier in Blackboard Jungle is the best depicted of the teachers. His love for teaching and his overwhelming desire to reach his students and help them get an adequate education is clearly shown. He is, however, placed in

situations where he must fend for himself with no outside help or support. His triumph in the end is a personal one. His use of a movie to communicate with the students points the way to being creative in teaching using materials that students can relate to.

Mr. Gifford in The Explosive Generation is more of an unwilling participant to helping the students deal with their problems. He also goes beyond the prescribed curriculum in order to meet their needs. The film points out the hypocrisy of a system that is supposed to teach students to think for themselves, but refuses to allow the students to talk about a subject that it believes is one that parents would object to. Teachers like Mr. Gifford can teach the students because they are trustworthy and value the rights of their students.

The students in the films vary, but generally tend to be middle class white. The only minority students dealt with at any length are the poor urban students going to Main Manual High School. It is important to note that at this time they are not shown to be either violent or into drugs. Miller, a black student in Blackboard Jungle, is seen as an intelligent leader, who works hard and is sympathetic to the

needs of others.

Juvenile delinquency and drugs are a white problem. They occur among the middle class and among the more affluent. Both basically good and bad teenagers are involved. The problems are ones that the high school is not prepared to deal with and which arise out of a society where parents do not take an active interest in the day to day needs of their teenagers. Under such circumstances the students fall prey to peer pressure and look for education outside the home and school. The students spend their time dancing to "rock 'n' roll" music, having drag races and going out. There is no indication of any sense of responsibility. Nice clothes, cars and big homes are usually a given. Most of the teenagers are portrayed as the only child, underscoring the theme of aloneness which several main characters seem to feel.

All the films point out the crucial role that parents play in the education of their children. There is a great need for an understanding family--in particular for a strong and caring father to provide the role model necessary for teenagers to be able to weather the problems presented to them during their teenage years. When the father figure is

absent or unsupportive or there is a breakdown in the communication between teenagers and their father, then juvenile delinquency and drug addiction are likely to occur. At the same time some parents are seen as too authoritarian, requiring their teenagers to act mature, but not treating them with respect. This tends to foster some type of rebellion.

For the most part the films convey the attitude that generally teachers and the institution of the high school have little or no influence on the lives of their students. There is no ideal school setting. The high school as a social institution contains many of the problems present in the adult world around it. In this world it is the men who must dominate. Heroes are usually males. Women are usually too weak or contribute to the problems by trying to emasculate men or tempt them. In rare circumstances is a woman helpful and then only as a figure on the sidelines like the teacher Miss Davis in High School Hellcats or a fellow student like Amy in The Cool and the Crazy.

Unlike the other films, The Explosive Generation, points the way to the empowerment of the students themselves in dealing with their needs--an issue that progressively

becomes important in later films and particularly in the films of the 1980s. Together the films from 1955 to 1961 lay the basic groundwork for the "teenage education" genre. While there are films done during the 1960s and 1970s based on ideas from these prototypes, it is not until the 1980s that there is a flowering of this genre, both in the number and diversity of the films produced about the high school experience. Increased concern about the quality of education and growing public awareness that American schooling is falling behind in preparing its students for a technologically advanced society once again makes the high school a subject with high audience appeal.

The high school experience of the 1980s moves out of the strictly public school domain and into the private sector which includes religious, preparatory and military education. Reflecting the growing acceptance of the multicultural aspects of society, black and Hispanic school experiences begin to be treated, although the Asian and Native Americans are still not represented. In addition the films show more urban school settings, as well as a representation of the education of all social classes-- although the majority of the films continue to deal with

white middle class America.

The role of the principal, as well as that of teachers, begins to take on more importance and in the case of two films the principals become the driving force behind the transformation of their schools. At the same time films with dedicated teachers continue to show what the effects of one person can be if one can establish a special bond with one's students and work creatively beyond the normal constraints of the system. The importance of formal education within the high school begins to be stressed and its relationship to securing a better future, whether one will go into the work force or on to college after graduation.

At the same time a number of films continue to depict the importance of informal education, particularly in getting along with one's peers. The social aspects of high school become more significant. Classification in terms of group identity in white middle class schools becomes particularly diverse. Students see themselves as being part of the system--the conservative well dressed students who are socially popular and work well within the high school environment, as well as those who do well in sports,

particularly the football team members. Then there is the rebellious outgroup who try to work around the system, tend to dress in more unusual and casual clothes and generally like "rock 'n' roll" music reminiscent of the 1960s. In addition are the "nerd" or "geek" groups representing the socially inept bright students and those whose appearance and actions are found distasteful by the socially dominant students.

Students in general continue the process of empowerment--with both happy and tragic results. The films show students who can successfully manipulate the educational system and the adults around them with one positively portrayed type of bright student emerging--the technologically advanced computer whiz. On the other hand two films of the 1980s show the terrible consequences when students act according to the values instilled in them by teachers, that conflict with the values of the adult world around them.

Parents in general still appear to be absent, unsupportive or major obstacles in the teenagers' lives. The films continue to point out the need for parental guidance and how crucial it can be in the educational

process. This is particularly so for the only children who continue to make up the majority of central characters.

While the problems of violence and drug addiction are still shown to exist in the films of the 1980s, they are no longer a major high school issue in most of the films. White students' concerns center around more personal problems such as self-fulfillment and social acceptability. Increasingly high schools turn their attention to the problem of providing the students with a basic skills education.

The high school world is still predominantly the domain of the male, whether in the role of principal, teacher, parent or student. Women support and nurture the men around. While some women may be bright and see things more realistically, it is the men who become the leaders and the heroes.

There are three main themes which emerge from the prototypes of the teenage film genre that become increasingly important in the films of the 1980s. The first is the importance of the success or failure of cross generational communication. Both teenagers and adults need to find a way to successfully communicate with each other.

The problem in many films is that this is not always possible. Some teenagers, just as some adults, particularly parents, cannot be reached. A second theme is that of a separate teenage culture which has its own language, dress and values. Not only does this make cross generational communication more difficult, but teenage culture is often composed of several subgroups which differ greatly from each other. A third theme is the importance of the peer group-- in particular whether one is considered as being in or being out. It is the source for a great deal of the information that is communicated and is generally the most important force in a teenager's life.

CHAPTER 4

THE WHITE EXPERIENCE: 1980-1985

The films of the 1980s represent a wide variety of teenage education experiences. For the purpose of this study the films have been broken down into various categories and examined in terms of public versus private school depictions, racial representations, and gender. This chapter will focus on describing and analyzing "teenage education" genre films which mainly deal with the white public school experience. It will examine the portrayal of attitudes and values about teenage education, the high school as an institution and the major participants. Since so many of the films produced during the 1980s fall into this category, a chronological division has been used as an organizational device. Chapter 4 will deal with films produced from 1980 to 1985 and Chapter 5 will deal with those produced from 1986 to 1989.

The majority of films produced from 1980 to 1985 presented the white public high school experience. While

there were some depictions of black students in these films the students, teachers, and principals were mainly white. A few films portraying schools with a multicultural mix of students also tended to focus on the white experience. The only high school with a fairly balanced cultural mix of students was in the film Fame which included white, black and Hispanic student experiences.

Fame

Fame, produced by Davis De Silva and directed by Alan Parker, is a 1980 film which depicts a white as well as a multiethnic, multiclass school experience. The film focuses on the formal and informal learning process of a group of talented students attending New York City's High School of Performing Arts. As a public school, admission is open to anyone who can qualify on the basis of an audition. The key criteria for selection center on a student's creative potential in music, dance or drama. While students are selected on the basis of an audition, their continued stay depends not only upon their ability to develop creatively, but also to satisfactorily complete a normal education with courses in science, math and English.

The film shows only two students struggling to meet the school standards. Lisa, a white dancer, does not put effort into improving her dancing and is eventually asked to leave. Leroy Johnson, a black male dancer, is barely able to read and is in danger of failing in his senior year because of his poor grasp of English.

Almost all the classes that are shown are those in the performing arts. The general problems surrounding the education of urban teenagers, such as drugs and motivation, are almost nonexistent. Only people who want to learn one of the performing arts apply and only those who have potential for success are selected.

Learning requires the students to work hard while they are in the classroom and practice with their peers outside. The only form of discipline needed under the circumstances is verbal. Students who show progress are told to work harder. Anyone who cannot meet the criteria is dismissed from school. This type of school is in a unique position having highly motivated students who want to learn. The teachers are able to select and keep only the best. They wield tremendous power under the circumstances and can use their time more efficiently, concentrating on what needs to

be taught rather than trying to get students motivated. The students, in turn, willingly follow the teachers' directions.

Students are slowly prepared for the realities of choosing a performing arts career. They are taught to take risks and learn that their chosen field requires the ability to handle rejection. In areas where there are few jobs, the students' attitudes with regard to the opinions of others become important. A belief in one's self has greater value if one is to survive in a cut throat world.

A performing arts education is not only based upon competition but also requires that students learn through cooperation by dancing in groups, playing an instrument in an orchestra or acting in scenes together. This facilitates learning in general, while encouraging peer communication in and out of the classroom. The adult attitude towards the importance of teenagers learning to communicate with each other is reflected by both the teachers and students. The drama teacher has students act out something important from their lives so the students can begin to understand each other. A music student, Bruno Martelli, composes electronic music that can only be heard on tape and believes learning

to play as part of a real live orchestra is no longer necessary with the invention of electronic keyboards. He is scolded by his music teacher who likens the playing of music by a lone musician for his personal pleasure to masturbation. At the school, he is constantly required to learn to play instruments with other students.

Students who learn together in groups tend to socialize together. Inevitably some type of bonding begins. Fame gives examples of both the negative and the positive effects of peer interaction. The problems of sex are a significant aspect of a teenager's life. They are presented in this film when Leroy is seduced by a white female dancer who is only interested in his body. The resulting pregnancy, which becomes a key obstacle to her career, is aborted. On the other hand, a black female singer, Coco, and Doris, a white drama student, have good relationships with fellow students. Both are shown as warm and nurturing. What is communicated is that wholesome relationships between students who are very good friends help them in dealing with themselves and the problems in their lives.

Teachers are generally depicted as older, competent, and fairly traditional in their teaching methods. They

range in gender, and, although the majority are white, there is a black male drama teacher who communicates well with all his students. The English teacher, Mrs. Sherwood, is portrayed as female, older, and not very attractive. In a hospital scene she is confronted by her student, Leroy, who tells her what his circumstances are by trying to communicate his desperation if he fails her class. What is said is significant because he points out that she does not really understand poor black culture and how it has affected his learning of English. She in turn tries to get across that teachers are human beings and that they have lives outside of a classroom. Both Leroy and his teacher live in different worlds. While the high school brings them together in certain ways, it, by itself, cannot bridge the cross generational communication gap. In dealing with students like Leroy, the school also cannot always provide a context in which cultural gaps can be overcome between students and teachers from different racial, ethnic or economic class backgrounds. Successful communication occurs at the peer level among students who form relationships based on common interests. In this context class and ethnic and racial backgrounds are not as important.

The two parents shown in the film are both white. They try to be supportive and encourage their children as much as possible. Bruno Martelli's father is a cab driver who loves his son, but has a problem understanding the type of music his son composes. He is thankful for the peer relationship that his son establishes with Coco, who encourages Bruno to compose music that the general public can enjoy. When Bruno does so, his father exuberantly plays it outside of the school. As student dancers move to the music in the street, Bruno's father visually shows his pride in his son. The fact that Bruno's father appreciates his son's music represents the opening up of a way to communicate between them.

Doris' mother is also shown in the film. Portrayed as a Jewish mother who tries to control her daughter's life, she is present when her daughter auditions for the school. While she continues to push Doris, the peer relationships that Doris fosters at the school begin to give her a feeling of self-worth and help her to break free from her mother's domination. Despite the fact that Doris still has difficulty making her mother understand what she wants, they maintain a good relationship.

Perhaps the most significant peer relationship established in the film is between Montgomery, a white gay drama student, and classmates Doris and a Puerto Rican student name Ralph Garcy. As an only child left alone by his actress mother, Montgomery finds a substitute family at the school. His sensitivity helps both his friends, as well as himself, face the challenges of growing up without adult support. The school and his chosen field of study--drama--provide a nurturing environment.

While Fame does not portray the typical white high school experience being a unique school with a multicultural mix of students, it presents the importance of peer learning and the need to belong, as well as the problem of cross generational communication. For the most part it shows a school that despite its cultural mix, is still dominated by white values and attitudes. Most of the students and all but one teacher are white. Only white parents are shown. Minority students like Leroy are expected to conform to white expectations and Ralph changes his name to sound more Anglo.

My Bodyguard

My Bodyguard, produced by Don Devlis and directed by Tony Bill in 1980, portrays the high school experience in Chicago. Both black and white students are shown, although the film concentrates on the white experience. The plot is fairly simple with a new student being confronted by a gang seeking protection money in exchange for leaving him alone. The potential violence of this group as depicted is minimal in comparison to that posed by the gang in Blackboard Jungle, and directed towards students only.

The new student, Clifford Peache, is portrayed as a good unspoiled teenager who has a close relationship with the adults around him. He lives in a warmly furnished apartment in a very expensive hotel managed by his father. Despite the fact that his mother was killed in a car accident, he seems happy. The employees of the hotel are very friendly towards him. His father is caring and playful. Clifford also has an eccentric grandmother living with him whose pursuit of men is a constant embarrassment for his father. He, however, understands her zest for life and enjoys a warm loving relationship with her.

When Clifford enters his new school, the film shows

women who help him find his first class. The school atmosphere is open and warm. It is brightly lit, clean and well maintained with students happily talking to each other. With no indication that there is any discipline problem, the film portrays the school environment in a positive way, conducive to learning.

In Clifford's first class, the English teacher, Ms. Clarice Jump, is shown trying to get the students to find seats so she can begin teaching. The room is neat with a nice bulletin board display of book covers and lit by sunlight communicating a comfortable learning environment. Although there is a degree of chaos as the students find their seats, the English teacher maintains control. Her character, as presented in terms of dress, hair, and manners, suggests a conservative old fashioned English teacher, but with a soft side. She is always lit warmly and her hair is not pulled back severely. She introduces the play Romeo and Juliet, taking a very realistic approach using words students understand to make the play more relevant to their lives and interests. A balance is maintained throughout between her ability to control and teach her class and her caring and realistic attitude

towards students.

The school's principal is also presented positively. His desk, in the middle of a room with other people working around, communicates an open and friendly attitude. When Mr. Peache calls him about his concern for his son's safety after learning that something happened to him on his first day of school, the principal immediately deals with the problem by giving the gang leader, Melvyn Moody, detention. At the same time, he advises Clifford about the school and how to socially handle the situation. He explains that it is not as sheltered as the private one he previously attended, but that the positive side is that in his present school people do not view things as narrowly. To get along, he suggests that Clifford not seek adult help every time he encounters trouble with other students. As he is talking to Clifford, he gets up from his desk and puts his arm around him in a fatherly fashion and calls him son. In this way, his character is shown to be one that easily relates to students in a fatherly way, being supportive and giving needed advice. He understands the teenage culture and the peer pressure that students like Clifford must face.

While the adults in the school and family are all very

supportive, Clifford has to learn informally how to survive in the school's social environment. He understands the importance of dealing directly with his peers and not letting his father know what is happening. Shown as being resourceful, Clifford sees the potential of using another student as his bodyguard, despite contrary advice from some of his classmates. Instead of being frightened by the rumored murderer, Ricky Linderman, Clifford seeks the truth. In the school's open atmosphere, he is able to approach Ms. Jump about the facts pertaining to Ricky. As he talks to her, both are seated next to each other. His ability to speak with adults is thus underscored as she tells him directly what she knows about the death of Linderman's brother.

Linderman is portrayed as a good person, who is misunderstood by his peers. His large size, aloof manner and sloppy dress make him appear threatening. When Clifford follows him to his neighborhood, it is shown as a poor area in which even the police fear to venture in after dark.

Linderman, a loner, shuns the company of both adults and his peers. Very little is ever revealed about his background. He talks about his loving relationship with his

brother and his responsibility for him from the time he was two. When asked what his father does, Linderman replies that he watches television. There seems to be no adult person to which Linderman is close. There is no mention of his mother, and he is shown working on a motorcycle alone. The only time any adult concern for him is voiced is when Clifford seeks him at his home and the woman answering the door says she is worried because he has not come home after school.

The importance of a caring woman in a teenager's life is communicated not only by Clifford's relationship with his grandmother and his teacher, Ms. Jump, but also in Clifford's grandmother's ability to communicate with Linderman. Upon reading his palm, she tells him things she believes are important to a teenage boy--that he will be sought after by girls, that he is intelligent, and that he will have a long and valuable life. The following scene finds Linderman talking for the first time with a group of students in a warm and friendly way. What is thus shown is that female adults can make a difference in helping teenagers establish better relationships with their peers.

As in Fame, important learning occurs outside the

classroom in social situations with peers, particularly when students help each other during crucial times. Linderman becomes protective of Clifford and other students preyed upon by Melvyn Moody. Clifford, in turn, does not desert his friend when Moody hires his own bodyguard to get back at Linderman. Conflict resolution is done the old fashioned way with both Linderman and Clifford forced to fight their opponents. Winning a fist fight can be seen as part of the male ritual in attaining adult status in American society. It is a way of confirming that one is able to stand up for oneself--of being independent and self reliant--values considered important in maintaining a democratic society.

My Bodyguard also stresses the importance of friendship during the high school years. Most of the main characters in teenage films are portrayed as only children. One parent is often dead. There is usually a lack of communication between the teenagers and their parents. The teenagers feel lonely and need to make friends their own age. The school setting provides a very important place for teenagers of all different backgrounds to meet and, therefore, is crucial to their social learning.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High

Fast Times at Ridgemont High was produced by Art Linson and Irving Gaff and directed by Amy Heckerling in 1982. Based on a novel by Cameron Crow, it uses information gathered in 1979 when the author went back to high school to research teenage culture. Unlike Fame which represented an aspect of teenage culture in the large east coast city of New York or My Bodyguard which represented the large midwest city of Chicago, Fast Times at Ridgemont High moves to the west coast and shows teenagers living in a smaller California city. Like the other films, however, it basically caters to teenagers as it portrays students' interests and life styles.

Ridgemont High is a public middle class school where the students appear to get along. As in My Bodyguard, black and white students are shown, but outside of two scenes that deal with a black football player and his brother, the film mainly revolves around white teenagers. Talk generally concerns male-female relationships and particularly explores the area of sex. The language used is very direct and the kind of teenage questions asked and answers given are fairly realistic. Adults are not involved in giving information

which underscores the importance of peer communication on this subject. A sexual relationship and the consequent abortion are handled in a fairly non dramatic way as part of the growing up process. In this pre-AIDS world, teenagers are shown freely exploring their sexual needs and not worrying about the consequences. The worse that can happen is an embarrassing situation. The teens thus lead shallow lives with no real plans for the future. In their world, informal learning about how to get along with the other gender is their main focus.

The high school is depicted as a safe environment where teachers are interested in their subjects and try to impart their knowledge. The science teacher, Mr. Vargas, is portrayed as a basically friendly person. He takes his class to visit a hospital. While the opportunity for valuable learning is presented, the film focuses on humor by having the teacher remove a heart from a cadaver thereby shocking the students. They also see a nursery, but without any reason presented for their visit. The film thus down plays learning presented by adults both in and out of the school.

The history teacher, Mr. Hand, also fares no better in

imparting knowledge. While shown as knowledgeable and organized, he is presented as a crotchety old man, fond of using authority over students. His teaching of history is not related to the students in a way they see as important. That his world is apart from theirs is shown by having him continuously deal with a water surfer, named Spicoli, who is happy in his own world and continually high on drugs. Although Mr. Hand goes to Spicoli's house to quiz him on history and one might expect that this would bring them closer, neither can relate to the other's reality. The film tells us at the end that Mr. Hand is only further convinced that all of his students are on drugs. Teachers like Mr. Hand and Mr. Vargas are thus portrayed as unable to perceive teenage reality and make a difference in their lives.

Spicoli is also shown as an example of a subculture within the broader California teen culture. While the majority of the teenagers look, act and talk in a fairly general American way, Spicoli and two of his friends are shown in several scenes getting high and falling out of an orange painted Volkswagen bus, making them look like 1960s hippies. Spicoli's use of words like "dude," "cruising" and "cool" places him in a reality where enjoying life is

primary. Surfing, getting high, drinking, eating, music and partying all have value. Except in his fantasy about being the best surfer, Spicoli is never seen in the company of girls. Instead he is always with male friends. He also is seen hanging out with a black teenager and using his brother's car. The fact that he drinks, smokes a joint, and then crashes the car is not shown as bad. The film portrays him as a very likeable human being who is clever enough to turn a negative situation into something positive. Painting slogans on the wrecked car as if made by an opposing team motivates its owner, Ridgemont High's star football player, to win the game. The film thus avoids any serious consequences of Spicoli's actions.

Although the dialogue alludes to the existence of parents, the only time a parent is seen is when the main character, Stacey is tucked into bed by her mother. The relationship appears warm and friendly, but the fact that Stacey then sneaks out of the house to meet a boyfriend suggests a large communication gap between parents and their teenage children. The teenagers ask peers for information regarding how to deal with the opposite gender, make their own decisions about having an abortion and handle their own

problems.

The adult is very separated from the teenage world. When adults are shown, they are usually presented as people to avoid. Stacey's brother Brad is a "happy-go-lucky" worker at the All American Burger until an adult customer insists on having a refund for a meal he doesn't like. The man is portrayed as obnoxious, but it is Brad who loses his temper and is fired by his adult boss. Then later at another job Brad is forced to wear a pirate uniform to deliver a fish order to a company. Very aware of his image, the costume that his new boss insists that he wear is too demeaning for a teenager to be seen in in public. The film thus shows that adults do not respect and are insensitive to teenagers' needs.

As portrayed in the film, none of the students has academic goals. They are mainly concerned with the social aspects of their life--particularly with their relationships with the opposite sex. Their world is that of the school where they can meet other teenagers and Ridgemont Mall where they work at various service jobs--waitressing, ushering and selling tickets to sold out concerts. Even in the Epilogue the only person who goes to college is presented as having

an affair with her professor. In this world the students have short term physical need based goals. Life is good and conflict is minimal.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High uses stereotypes to communicate to its teenage audience. The film portrays situations in a humorous way and avoids any serious issues or consequences from actions taken by the teenagers. It is more a fantasy world than a realistic one.

Class of 1984

Class of 1984 was produced by Arthur Kent and directed by Mark Lester in 1982. It is a Blackboard Jungle of the 80s, with an urban high school being terrorized by a white gang of violent punks led by a musically talented but psychotic student named Stegman. Abraham Lincoln High School is a teenage world divided with a few bad kids controlling the many good kids. As the biology teacher, Terry tells the new music teacher, Andy Norris, they are at war. The security guards are unable to control the situation and the police have their hands tied, because they are dealing with juveniles whose rights are protected at the expense of the rest of the people. Most of the teachers

have given up trying to teach and the principal is just biding his time until he can move to a board position. Under such circumstances learning is very difficult. As the principal states, about half the senior class is graduating with a substandard education.

The garbage can of the 1950s is now a prison temporarily holding people until it is time for them to graduate. Students are searched for weapons as they enter, and television cameras watch activity in the halls. The principal is the warden who tries to direct his police as he states: "Surveillance is the name of the game around here." There are too few guards and the teachers have learned to keep their mouths shut and a gun handy to protect themselves. The walls are filled with graffiti and teachers are told to never leave their classroom unlocked.¹

The film portrays a very negative image of an urban high school. Its primary educational purpose has been abandoned in the face of more immediate social problems. Although there are good students interested in learning, the majority of the educational system's resources are consumed

¹Class of 1984, 35 mm, 93 min., United Film Distribution, Canada, 1982.

by the few disruptive teenagers. The school reflects the outside world where violence is a growing concern and the legal system is no longer capable of effectively handling the increase in teenage crime. The only thing the punks value is money and power. Within the school, Stegman and his gang of high school students are in control and not even the principal is able to permanently remove them. When the adults are unwilling or unable to do anything to control the situation, then teenagers take control and terrorize those who are not part of their group.

The film establishes during the opening credits that the school is in a big city where there are many problems. Teenagers are presented running, illegally riding the back of a bus, fighting and smoking dope. The school is large, multiracial and its walls covered with graffiti. The lyrics inform the audience that the new teacher is entering a world where he will have to struggle to keep his dream of teaching from becoming a nightmare. People in the school must learn to live with fear. At the same time, the lyrics raise the question of what the future will be if the students presented in the film are the ones who will one day control the world.

Mr. Norris, the young new teacher from Nebraska, is portrayed as naive in the ways of the big city school. Like the teacher Dadier in Blackboard Jungle, he is anxious to impart his knowledge and looking forward to fatherhood. Dressed in a suit and tie, he is presented as a warm, open, and very dedicated teacher trying to cope with an unsupportive system. When assigned to corridor and washroom duty during his free periods, he objects that he needs that time to prepare. The principal, however, does not view teaching as primary in importance as he tells Norris that at Lincoln High teaching is done in spite of what is happening.

Without an effective principal, the teachers are shown fighting a losing battle. To survive, they have to look the other way when something is happening and carry protection. They hate their jobs. Teachers like Terry have become completely disillusioned with their work. He does not see any student showing an interest in biology. As he says to Mr. Norris:

I'm haunted. I'm such a bloody failure. Tell you the truth Andy I don't think I can teach anymore. I can't get through. I always had this dream I would make kids read every book that they could ever lay their hands on. Sometimes I think I would do anything if I could leave one person

behind who'd heard me.²

For Terry, like the math teacher in Blackboard Jungle, teaching in a school full of violence eventually catches up with him. In this case, his rabbits are slaughtered and their remains strewn around the room. Using his gun to force the students to respond to his questions, Terry tries to take his revenge on those responsible. The fact that some of the students begin to give the right answers when confronted with the possibility of being shot, shows that they have learned something despite the lack of any previous response. While the film does not explore an alternative learning system for students who cannot or will not make the effort to learn, this scene visually communicates that some students may only respond when in a situation where the teacher is in full control.

Norris is the only adult seen fighting back to try and teach the students who want to be taught. Like Dadier in Blackboard Jungle, he loves teaching and cares about his students. While he recognizes the musical talent of Stegman, he does not let him play. Stegman has serious

²Ibid.

problems that would disrupt the learning of the other students. Norris thus finds himself the lone male teacher who despite all dangers and without any support from the principal, tries to do what he believes is his job--to teach.

The Lincoln High environment raises the question of what can be done about students like Stegman who not only endanger the lives of everyone, but who also prevent the learning of others. A symbolic connection is made between what the United States stands for and what is happening to its beliefs and values at the school. A student who buys angel dust from Stegman gets high. He climbs the flag pole outside the school and begins to recite the pledge of allegiance ending with "liberty and justice for all." As he is doing this, he holds out the flag to emphasize its importance. At the end of his recitation, the flag tears, and he falls to his death. The film communicates that the school is no longer preparing students to take their place as responsible citizens in a democracy. The democratic principles of freedom and justice for all are being torn asunder by students like Stegman. The only solution is that voiced by Norris when he tries to get the dead student's

friend, Arthur, to help him: "I think that the only rights we have are the ones we're willing to fight for. You owe it to your friends at school to stand up for yourself."³

In some ways the film tries to show a similarity between the war waged at Lincoln with what happened in Europe during World War II when Hitler took power and abolished the rights of others. This is done by making a connection between Stegman and Hitler. The point is made that Stegman is German as he speaks to Mr. Norris in German. Then his gang members greet the new music teacher with a Nazi salute. Later in the film Stegman is seen happily watching the biology teacher burn to death in his car. Behind him there is a painting of a swastika on a wall.

The only parent shown in the film is Mrs. Stegman, a young attractive woman devoted to her son whom she sees as a misunderstood genius. She is blind to his problems. Although Norris tries to talk to her, Stegman easily manipulates his mother. Like the portrayal of parents in many teenage films, she is an enabler whose actions only create a negative influence.

³Ibid.

The film points out that Stegman's father has died. As a fatherless only child he has no one to discipline him. Without a solid family foundation he creates his own as leader of his gang. The character is presented as truly evil. Not only does a police officer disclose the many different crimes that Stegman has committed from beatings and drugs to rape and prostitution, but within the course of the film he is responsible for a series of violent acts. Visually, he is seen as happy when Terry is burned to death --the red flames portending things to come. This is done to justify the extreme actions that Norris is forced to take to save himself and his wife whom Stegman also rapes.

In contrast to Stegman are Arthur and Deneen, two music students who are basically good and want to learn. They are costumed in cool and blue colors to contrast with the red and black worn by Stegman and his gang. They are presented as struggling to stay away from trouble and finish high school. Deneen is a capable and self-motivated student who leads the music class rehearsals during the former teacher's absence. The fact that a substantial number of students in the music class are willing to participate in a concert that requires extra effort also communicates that no

matter how terrible a school might seem there are students that want an education if only there is a teacher available who can teach them.

The principal is portrayed as a reactive, rather than a proactive individual. Watching the television monitors in his office he places himself in a safe haven and lets the security guards and teachers directly handle the students. He is an older conservatively dressed individual who does not want to stick his neck out and try to change things. Like the teachers, he is focused upon survival. As Norris points out, he is quick to come to the side of the disruptive students but does nothing to support his teachers. His answer is that "A teacher is required to be responsible." What is thus communicated is that in this high school world only the teachers have to obey the rules. The students who are disruptive have nothing to lose and, therefore, have no responsibilities. Education means nothing to them. The high school provides them with an ideal environment in which to operate. Since there is no one to keep them in check they can roam at will and prey on

whomever they wish.⁴

Although the film is a dramatization and exaggerates to tell its story, it communicates some serious problems that plague high school teachers like Norris and Terry. Teenagers classified as juveniles are treated very differently from adults without consideration for the type of crimes they commit, or the safety of those around them. Such students in a public high school are able to break rules and get away with it. High schools as rigid structures are not equipped (nor do they have the power) to punish those who disrupt the system. In a culture where the general public sees more value in making money than in being well educated, there is not much to support the teachers in doing their job. To compound the problems, the legal system cannot back up a school system that is having problems with its teenage students. Both teachers and students have to live in fear, because there is no institution or person who is willing to take a stand against Stegman and his gang. While parental support in dealing with disruptive students could be an important element in helping the school, it is

⁴Ibid.

often the most lacking.

Norris represents the American individual who refuses to give in to tyranny. When confronted by his wife about what she considers his obsession with the students at Lincoln High and what she should tell their child if her husband dies in what he considers to be his line of duty--being a teacher, Norris replies: "I'm just trying to do my job. . . . What do you want to tell him? That I was a coward? That I ran away as soon as I had a problem?" What is thus communicated is that Norris must stand up for his rights to teach, just as he has encouraged his student Arthur to stand up for himself. As a teacher he must be the students' champion and a role model.⁵

In trying to fight Stegman, Norris is forced to cross the line between good and evil. With his wife raped and in danger and his own life on the line he becomes the warrior whose means are justified by the end. His only option in dealing with his attackers is to eliminate them. He hesitates for a moment when Stegman pleads with him not to let him fall off the rope he is holding onto telling him,

⁵Ibid.

"I'm just a kid." As Norris reaches out to help Stegman he communicates that despite everything he is still basically a good human being. This is not so of Stegman who calls him sucker and pulls out a knife to stab him. Delivering a final blow, Norris rids the world of a Satan.⁶

As in Blackboard Jungle, one teacher is able to make a difference. Norris reaches the students who want to learn and who play a concert while he fights for his life. On the other hand, just as Dadier was never able to communicate with the leader of the gang, West, so too Norris also cannot communicate with Stegman. The problem posed is whether or not some teenagers cannot be reached. In both films the answer seems to be that teachers can help create a line of communication with the students to facilitate learning, but while all students may be treated equal, not all students are. For those who will not cooperate it is not because of the failure of the educational system. Not all teenagers are good or can be changed. Those who are not need to be handled differently.

⁶Ibid.

Tex

Tex, produced by Tim Zinnemann and directed by Tim Hunter in 1982, presents a quite different high school experience as it follows the life of two brothers attending high school in the small town of Bixby, Oklahoma. Having been abandoned by their widowed father, they are left alone to fend for themselves on the family farm. The older brother, Mason, is portrayed as serious and hardworking. He longs to leave Bixby and sees a basketball scholarship to Indiana University as his ticket to a better life. As the older brother, however, he also is left with the responsibility of taking care of fifteen-year-old Tex. Unlike Mason, Tex is immature and happy living where he is. Horses are his main interest in life.

Bixby High School is shown as a very nice clean school which brings together all the teenagers from the area. For poor students like Mason and Tex, there are few opportunities out of their poverty. Mason feels trapped. Not being academically excellent, his only way to go to college and change his life is through a sports scholarship. With the support of his coach he applies to Indiana.

The film shows little interaction between the coach

and the other teachers in the school with Mason or his brother. The only times that Tex is shown in school deal with his English class. The teacher is portrayed as fairly young and conservative. It is clear from her first conversation with him that he is only interested in reading about horses. The second time that he is in class he is involved in a prank--replacing typewriter ribbons with cap rolls. Tex does not show any real interest in academic learning. High school for him is just another place to have fun.

The school, however, does have an important role to play in the lives of teenagers. While it helps Mason through athletics, it also helps Tex through the concern of the vice principal, Mrs. Johnson. When he gets into trouble she talks to him in a straight forward and caring manner. Understanding his family background, she finds a job for him taking care of horses and tells him that she hopes he takes it seriously as it may be the only chance that he will have to do something good for himself in life. Not only does this job give him the opportunity to do what he really likes, but it also provides him with a sense of security and stability. As people around him change and leave he has

something to do that can help him achieve a sense of independence.

Without parental guidance, the importance of learning from a parental substitute is stressed. Mason is not only a brother and older peer--but the father figure whom Tex lacks. He is quick to point out to Tex the realities of life. He is aware of his friend Lem's drug activities and also discloses the dead end life that Lem has entered into by marrying a girl that he got pregnant, but doesn't love. Mason also is very direct in answering Tex's question about having sex with a girl. His perspective on life helps steer Tex toward's independent thinking, rather than relying on what other people say or think.

The only two parents shown in the film are Mason's and Tex's father, Mr. McCormick and Cole, the father of Tex's best friend, Johnny. Mr. McCormick, a former rodeo star, enjoys life but has no strong sense of responsibility to his sons. While the relationship is a warm one, it is clear that there is little communication between father and sons. Mr. McCormick is like a child that will never grow up.

Cole, in contrast, is portrayed as a very wealthy and serious man who is devoted to his family. He, however, also

has little communication with his sons. As portrayed in the film, he is very authoritarian and less likeable than Mr. McCormick. Since he values money, he sees his son's friendship with poor Tex as undesirable and continually tries to keep them apart. He thus is seen as a very prejudiced and narrow minded adult.

The one girl who stands out in the film is Jamie, Johnny's sister. Like Mason, she is very mature for her age, quite outspoken and destined to leave Bixby. While in love with Tex, she realizes that the relationship would never last. They come from two different worlds and have different aspirations.

The film portrays the teenage years as a crucial time for growing up. It is a time when there is a tremendous amount of pressure to begin acting like an adult and taking responsibility, and yet adult guidance--particularly a good father role model--is usually absent. Teenagers, unable to communicate with adults, often have to learn from other teenagers or through their own experiences. While the high school does not prepare one to socially deal with the problems that the students face, it can help find avenues of opportunity where students with different interests can

begin to move towards self fulfillment.

Wargames

Wargames produced in 1983 by Harold Schneider and directed by John Badham follows the adventures of a high school computer whiz kid who tries to break into a game manufacturing company's computer and play some of its latest programs. Instead his ingenuity leads him to breaking into the military's computer and almost starting World War III by playing a game called "Global Thermonuclear Warfare."

Although the film does not concentrate on the formal high school experience it does try to show that a school is not necessarily the best place to learn. Some teenagers like the hero, David, are basically underachievers in school, but are very intelligent and have tremendous potential which can be tapped when they are placed in situations which require a great deal of creative thinking.

David is shown late for biology class and receiving an F on his exam. When asked a question by the teacher he makes a joke and is sent to the office. It soon is clear that this is already an established pattern and the woman in the principal's office, as well as the principal, know him

well. David uses this situation as an opportunity to find the password for the school's computer, thus turning his action of antagonizing the biology teacher into a positive one for his own needs. He then is able to use his knowledge to break into the school's computer and change his grade, outwitting the adult world as represented by his teacher.

David like many other teenage heroes is portrayed as a loner and underachiever who channels his energies into other areas. He is alienated from his parents who live in their own world and are wrapped up in their own activities. When we learn that David has not been to school for a week, his father is shown as oblivious to what is going on with his son. Instead he is concerned about a crossword puzzle. David thus is seen being able to do what he wants without parental supervision. His focus is on playing computer games. It is because of this interest that he is able to learn a great deal on the subject. Confronted with the problem of breaking into another computer, he is shown going to what appears as a university and talking to two young men who by their dress and manners are also "techie" types. One particular "nerdy" looking fellow is very quick in providing the information that David needs. The following scenes then

show how capable David is in doing research as he goes to the library and finds information on the man who developed a computer capable of learning that the government is using for military purposes.

After David gets into trouble by breaking into the government's computer, the film turns into a mental combat between a teenager and the adult world. No one wants to believe his story about how he was able to access the computer and what is going on as a result. It is thus up to David's ingenuity to handle the situation. He is shown as being very knowledgeable about electronics as he finds a way to escape from a secured room and then later makes a telephone call without money. When needing outside help he turns to one of his peers--a girl he has met in his biology class. Together they seek the help of the one adult who is capable of helping them communicate with the adult world--Dr. Falken.

As an inventor involved with computer games, Dr. Falken is the ideal person with whom David can relate. Using creative instructional approaches to teach computers how to learn from games sets him apart from teachers using traditional teaching methods in schools. Dr. Falken is also

a potential substitute father figure for David, having once had a son whom he taught to play games on his computer. He is thus the male role model who fits the needs of David and with whom understanding is possible. He is also the ideal person to bridge the communication gap between the teenage and adult worlds and help David in stopping the computer from continuing the Global Thermonuclear War game.

The film's plot resembles the struggle between David and Goliath. David is the young teenager who alone and armed only with his own ingenuity must face the mighty adult Goliath military establishment. In the end, David is able to prevail because he is able to apply his knowledge to practical problems.

Wargames is a film that appeals to both adults and teenagers. Its more serious and realistic tone gives it more depth than many films made about teenagers during the 1980s. There are some important questions, however, that it sidesteps as part of its dramatic license. The inability of schools to motivate students like David is never raised. His profile as an intelligent underachiever who is alienated from his parents is mentioned only as an explanation of the type of person who gets into trouble. There is also the

problem of handling the fact that David has no morality with regard to stealing information from the game company, making illegal telephone calls, and changing grades on the school's computer. Portrayed as a basically nice guy, David is the kind of teenager that needs to be reached and challenged by high schools since he can contribute a great deal to society.

All the Right Moves

All the Right Moves was produced by Stephen Deutsch and directed by Michael Chapman in 1983. Set in a steel mill town in Pennsylvania, it presents the high school experience of teenagers whose parents are blue-collar workers trapped in their poor environment. There are few options for the future and opportunities for leaving the town are rare. The only way out is by being successful at football.

Ampipe High School is shown mainly in football scenes. There is no real presentation of the academic side and no mention is made of anyone being smart enough to obtain a scholarship. Outside of football, the only classroom scene shows a typing class run by the football coach.

During a football rally, one of the adults makes it clear that the football team not only represents the students in the school, but also everybody in the town. In a community where people know almost everyone else, the activities of the high school are of concern to those who see it as their alma mater and who are in some way connected to the school through family and friends. Pride in a team has a positive ripple effect throughout the whole community.

High school football is not only an important game, but may be the only way for male students who are not strongly academically inclined to go to college by obtaining a football scholarship. It is a ticket out of a cycle of poverty and the opportunity to pursue a career in a field other than that of their fathers and relatives. As presented in the film, it is also a way for a teacher like the coach to escape. The importance of football in American society is that it creates opportunity--particularly at the high school level where teenagers locked in poverty have little chance of going to college because of the costs involved.

High school football is also an activity where students, as well as their teachers are considered in terms

of their individual ability and not their race. Since a team has to function well together, getting along with everyone is crucial. In All the Right Moves the white and black team members mingle easily together and the film communicates a sense of friendship as the black football players try to teach the white players how to dance. It is thus not only a way of providing equal opportunity, but also putting into practice the principle that all men are created equal.

The coach, Mr. Nickerson, is shown as a hard driving individual whose whole life is focused on making his team win so that he can be considered for a college job. As a high school coach he is in the position to play god by deciding who can play on the team and thereby have the chance to be considered by college recruiters. He also is presented as having another more caring and vulnerable side in his relationship with his wife and the assistant coach, Jess.

The focus of the film is on football star Stefan Djordjevic, the younger son of a family of steel workers. His interest is in engineering. Realistically appraising his football ability, he understands that with his size the

farthest he can go is college football. He thus is not as interested in attending the school with the best football program, but one with a good engineering degree.

As a still fairly immature teenager, Stefan is portrayed as not yet having the emotional control necessary with adults. When a college recruiter shows interest in recruiting him, Stefan indicates lack of interest in the school. Then later when his team loses he is unable to control himself when the coach throws blame on one of his friends. Still considered as a child and placed in situations where his communication with adults can jeopardize his future, he portrays the teenager caught in a transitional period. He must make serious decisions with no experience to guide him.

Stefan's friends, Brian Riley and Vinnie Salvucci are also faced with serious decisions. Brian has gotten his girlfriend pregnant. Since she is Catholic, abortion is not an option. Despite a football scholarship, Bryan is trapped. His family values make fatherhood more important than a college education.

Salvucci is also trapped by poverty. With several family members out of work he desperately needs a job.

Although not a particularly good football player, the football coach says he will try to help him. Unfortunately Salvucci's short sighted view of life leads him to stealing and jail before the coach is able to do anything. Having no one else to turn to he calls to Coach Nickerson as he is led away saying, "Help me coach."⁷

Stefan's girlfriend, Lisa, is another example of a teenager trapped by poverty. While longing to study music at college, her family hasn't the financial resources to send her. As she tells Stefan:

I want to go to college and study music, but we can't afford it and nobody in Ampipe gets a music scholarship--just football scholarships. So I'll be a grocery clerk. I'm stuck here Stef. I haven't got a chance. I'm seventeen years old. It's not . . . fair.⁸

The lopsidedness of the educational system is pointed out which provides more higher learning opportunities to those who have athletic ability, but poor academic skills, while denying others like herself who are creatively inclined.

⁷All the Right Moves, 35 mm, 91 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1983.

⁸Ibid.

The film communicates the opportunity differences for high schools students. Although American schools teach the Constitutional belief that all men are created equal and there is a stress on equal opportunity in American society, not all areas of study or activity at the high school level are considered the same. Furthermore schools located in poor areas offer less opportunity than those in wealthier areas. While the more affluent rival school, Walnut Heights, has better facilities and many more sports programs, Ampipe has to do with poor facilities and few programs.

Except for some football crowd scenes, parents are generally not shown in the film. Only the father of the main character, Stefan, is portrayed. Mr. Djordjevic is shown as a strong, hard working, middle-aged man who has a good relationship with both Stefan and his older brother. As a widower, he is left to guide Stefan at a crucial time in his life. While he tries to tell his son what he should do to secure the future that he wants, he is not overbearing or authoritative. Even when Stefan finds himself in trouble having talked back to the coach and inadvertently participated in an attack on the coach's property, his

father is there for him. Rather than placing blame on the coach as other adults do for the loss of a crucial football game, he tries to steer his son to work things out by talking to the coach. When this fails and it looks as if Stefan has lost all chances for getting a college education, his father is still there for him. Cradling him in his arms Mr. Djordjevic communicates a very loving and caring father who can provide the emotional support that his son needs to be able to make the transition into adulthood. While Stefan asks his father if he is ashamed of him and if he has done something wrong for which he is being punished when all college opportunities disappear, his father reassures him. He not only tells Stefan that his mother was proud of him and that he is proud of him and loves him, but also that he knows that his son is in pain and that it's okay to feel bad.

Stefan's girlfriend also functions as a substitute mother by helping Stefan see things in perspective, when he makes mistakes that affect his relationship with the coach. In the long run it is her active support that makes the difference by opening up the channels of communication between Stefan and his coach. Stefan acknowledges his

mistakes but also points out the position of power that the coach has in determining which of his players should be considered for college scholarships by the recruiters. While teaching the value of togetherness to the football players in playing games, he then acts as god separating them into those who will or will not have a college education according to his wishes.

Just as Stefan matures because of his high school experiences, so too does the coach in understanding that his position has such a tremendous impact on the lives of his students. Formal education--particularly that learned in playing high school football--is thus seen as a very important aspect of the high school experience. It is one area where everyone has to work together to achieve a common goal. It is also very important in American society as one of the few ways that poor and/or less academically able students can still have a chance to receive a college education and hopefully a better life.

High School USA

High School USA, also produced in 1983 by Alan Eisenstock and Larry Mintz and directed by Rod Amateau, was

originally a made-for-TV feature which shows the social and peer-regulated society of a midwestern high school. There is the group that basically runs the school--the rich "preppies," and those who are outcasts from this group--the "nerds," "greasers" and intellectuals. The diverse subcultures are clearly defined in terms of dress and actions. The "preppies" dress well. The head of the group, Beau Middleton, wears shirts with an alligator on the front to show that they are an expensive designer label. Going to the best restaurants, throwing large catered parties and offering gifts to the teachers to gain influence in the school are all presented as part of the preppy world. Group cohesiveness is important. They believe that they are superior and therefore entitled to whatever they can get. Money and power are something that they value greatly.

Beau is the king of the "preppies"--the high school Caesar of the 1980s using his father's money to maintain an entourage of students who cater to his needs. At the same time, he controls the teachers by determining which teacher will receive a cash award of \$10,000. Female members of his group also use their fathers to offer bribes to other teachers to ensure that their daughters obtain whatever they

want. In this way the film shows the corruptibility of the adult world and how it can have an impact on the school system. In comparison, the outcast students have no direct influence on the school or the teachers.

The outcasts dress in a wide assortment of less expensive and nondesigner clothes. They include those with little or no academic potential, the genius type, as well as those who don't care to succeed in school. While the preppies are white and favor WASPS (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants), the outcast group includes a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and both white and black students. More individualistic and independent, they value people and are interested in the qualities of a person rather than how they appear to others.

The basic concern of the students is consistent with other teenage films. Peer relationships are primary in importance and in particular being socially acceptable to the opposite gender. Unlike Ridgemont High School in Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Excelsior Union High School in this film represents more the suburban mid-America type of lifestyle with a more conservative approach to dating. Sex is not a primary motivating factor. Image and attitude are

more important to the preppy group. The problems of crime and violence do not seem to exist in this mainly middle and upper class school and the majority of students are white.

Modernizing a ritual of the late 1950s, Beau is challenged by his outcast rival, Jay Jay, to a drag race. At stake are self-respect and Beau's girlfriend, Beth Franklin. Since this is a comedy the outcome has no tragic ending but shows that when a group of never-do-well students are properly motivated and work together they can accomplish a great deal. With the help of an idiot boy named Bandini (reminiscent of Santini in Blackboard Jungle), Jay Jay's Valiant is transformed into a car that can defeat Beau's new Porsche.

The film concentrates on informal social learning as students focus in on how to be acceptable within the context of the high school environment. The adults around are of little help. A clear barrier of communication is maintained almost all the time. The film continues the practice of absenting parents from the lives of most of the students.

Jay Jay, like David in Wargames, is an intelligent underachiever. As an only child, who has not seen his mother since he was two and having his father rarely around,

he is a loner who easily fits into the outcast crowd. One of his friends, Archie, also appears not to have a mother. His father, the best scratching post (for cats) salesman in the Midwest, travels frequently. Archie is presented as a young man who is just a step above Bandini in handling social situations. To complicate matters, Archie's father drinks and is easily duped by the high school kids. He acts like a teenager himself buying a Trans Am and asking Jay Jay if he would like to drag with him.

The only other parents actually shown are Beth's when Beau goes to pick her up at home. They look like parents from the 1950s--well dressed and sitting in the living room waiting to meet their daughter's date. Unfortunately the film ridicules them by having Beau use flattery to get what he wants. Beth's mother is presented as shallow and interested in appearances as she tells her daughter not to lose Beau because Beth and Beau look good together. Beth's father is made to appear like a fool as he repeats what his grandfather said to him as a boy regarding intelligence, "Baxter I don't give a hang what you've got upstairs as long

as you're home for supper."⁹

Most of the teachers fare no better in their representations. The shop teacher looks and acts like a wimp as he is surrounded by teenagers doing whatever they want in his class. It is clear that he has given up on teaching and is only around to babysit. He is not above expressing the fact that he hates his job. Then there is the biology teacher, Mr. Plaza, who appears to be teaching the same kind of curriculum as the teacher in Wargames talking about plant reproduction. Like most of the science teachers represented, he does care about his subject. Mr. Plaza, however, willingly gives information to two students about an upcoming test and bends over backwards to ingratiate himself with Beau in order to win the teacher award. Knowing that Beau's father favors WASPS, he does not let on that he is Greek and hides his relationship with the gym teacher, Miss DiAngelo because she is Italian. His actions make him morally corrupt and not a fitting example for high school students to emulate.

Perhaps the worst depiction of a teacher is Mr.

⁹High School USA, 35 mm, 96 min., Doron Productions Ltd., Los Angeles, Calif., 1983.

Hoffman, who teaches history. As a caricature of a blind German Nazi, he dresses in black, walks stiffly and waves his walking cane around like a weapon. Although in his class he talks about history being often determined by the struggle between classes, between the rich and poor, the superior and inferior, he never relates this information to the students on a level that has meaning to them--the struggle in the school between the preppies and the outcasts.

The principal is the only adult who is treated in a fairly realistic manner. Mr. Kinney is a warm approachable person who communicates well with students. He shows a genuine interest in Jay Jay and keeps trying to motivate him to think about his future and use his potential. He also is a kind of loner going to Club Med in the summer and therefore more able to relate to Jay Jay's feelings of independence. They both share a dislike for Beau Middleton and his trying to control people in the school. As a kind of father/friend figure Mr. Kinney says to Jay Jay:

You got a brain, but you refuse to use it. You have everything going for you. You could do or be anything you want, but all you want to be is a screw up. Jay Jay not all the good things in life are reserved for guys like Beau Middleton. Wake

up and make a commitment to something, somebody, yourself.¹⁰

When Jay Jay challenges Beau to a drag race and manages to win, Mr. Kinney responds by first telling him what would be appropriate for a principal concerned with his students to say--that he hates car races, they're dangerous and stupid and don't prove a thing. Since he also recognizes that Jay Jay has finally made a commitment to something by his actions, he congratulates him saying "You took a stand and you didn't quit. I'm proud of you." Mr. Kinney thus becomes a kind of surrogate father in the absence of any other male adults in Jay Jay's life. He is someone who believes in him and is there to give him support when necessary.¹¹

The only other adult in the school who helps support Jay Jay's morale when being faced with preparing for the drag race is the gym teacher Miss DiAngelo. Classified as an outsider because of her ethnic background, she is more than willing to help do something to counter the influence that Beau has on both the students and her teacher

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

boyfriend, Mr. Plaza. Although she looks foolish doing a cheerleader's routine in an adult dress to cheer Jay Jay and his friends on, she is treated sympathetically in the film because she is not willing to be corrupted by money.

The only minority student that stands out is a black student named Otto. He is neatly dressed in conservative clothes and lives in what appears to be a middle class house surrounded by things having to do with space and the solar system. Not only is he Jay Jay's friend, but also a genius who is building a robot that he hopes will be used by NASA. The film makes no issue of his race and shows him treated as an individual. He seems to be well adjusted even though he states that everyone in school thinks he's strange because he is so smart. Although Jay Jay is hailed as a kind of hero for winning the car race with Beau, it is Otto's mechanical ability that enables him to do so.

The film also communicates that Otto is a sensitive human being as it shows him in several close-ups talking to his robot prior to having to take it apart in order to use it for Jay Jay's car. Unlike most of the outcast student images presented in the film, Otto is not made to look ridiculous. He is an ideal student--hard working, self-

motivated and focused on learning. When the other students "goof off" during auto shop he continues to work on his robot. He, like the black student in Blackboard Jungle, communicates that minorities are equally capable of excelling when race is not a factor in a school setting.

High School USA continues to stress the importance of informal learning. Parents are absent or shown in a negative way. Few adults in the school system are capable of communicating with the students--and then only outside the context of the classroom.

Hollywood High, Part II

Hollywood High, Part II was produced by Colleen Meeker and Cotton Whittington and directed by Caruth C. Byrd and Lee Thomburg in 1984. It depicts the world of teenagers as dominated by sex, drugs and "rock 'n' roll." School is something that is attended but has little importance in their lives.

For the main teenagers, Bunny, Kiki and Ginger and their boyfriends, life is fun and frolic. They move effortlessly from the classroom to the beach and pool where they devote themselves to drinking beer, smoking marijuana

and having sex. The film presents a stereotyped world view of a California teenager. The title and name of the high school, Hollywood High, communicate a certain set of expectations that the film fulfills. Hollywood connotes beautiful people living in a kind of paradise of sensual pleasure. Not only can the word "high" refer to the high school, but it also has additional meaning for those familiar with the drug culture. Throughout the film the students are constantly getting "high." It is another teenage fantasy world.

The three adults that the film focuses on, a police officer and two teachers, are shown in a negative but funny way. They are portrayed more as caricatures than real people. The police officer is presented as a married man having an affair with a teenage girl. In several scenes he chases the teenagers after they taunt him with the film speeded up in one scene for comic effect.

The worst adult depictions in the film are those of the two female teachers. The English teacher, Ms. Huxley, and the biology teacher, Ms. North, are both dressed conservatively with hair pulled back and glasses. They act very cold and distant in the classroom and students comment

that they are Lesbians. The dialogue communicates that they are living together. Ms. Huxley makes a point of telling Ms. North to replenish their supply of wines and liqueurs --an inappropriate subject for two teachers to discuss in front of the students in their class.

Later in the film these teachers are shown luring the teenage boys to their home with the excuse that the boys need help to pass their classes. When their girlfriends find them, the film uses visual communication to make its point about the teachers. Ms. North opens the door dressed in a baby doll nightgown and smoking a cigarette. Inside the house the three young men are lying in their underwear on several couches looking drunk with bottles next to them. If the visual portrayal is not enough, Ms. Huxley comments that she is teaching them advanced math, while Ms. North with drink in hand proclaims she is teaching them body chemistry. One of the girlfriend then states, "So this is what it takes to graduate from Hollywood High."¹²

The film thus portrays the teachers as exploiting youth to satisfy their need for physical pleasure. Getting

¹²Hollywood High, Part II, 35 mm, 85 min., Lone Star Pictures International, Inc., West Hollywood, Calif., 1981.

the students drunk and taking advantage of them in a serious film would have dire consequences. Here, however, there is only a shallow response by the female students. While the film is not to be taken as realistic, the portrayal of the teachers is in keeping with one of the views that female high school teachers are a bad choice for teaching teenage boys with raging hormones.

Although the film is more about sexploitation than education, it does continue to use certain stereotypes already found in other films about teenagers. Social life and being with peers are seen as far more important than school and education. Adults are viewed in a negative way. Parents are absent and seem to have no real importance in the life of their children.

Valley Girl

Valley Girl, produced by Wayne Crawford and Andrew Lane and directed by Martha Coolidge in 1983, is a kind of Romeo and Juliet story of two high school students in California who represent different teenage subcultures and the peer pressure that tries to keep them segregated. Julie is a student at Valley High School located in the more

affluent valley area of California. Although within driving distance to Hollywood High attended by Randy, her teenage world is like a different culture. What the film tries to communicate is how the high school mirrors the values of the community that it is located in. Going from one high school to another can be like going to a foreign country. Students in different schools have their own dialect, dress and values. Peer pressure is used to maintain the differences. Those not willing to conform to their school culture are socially excluded.

Julie and her female friends are shown preoccupied with buying the right fashionable and feminine looking clothes in the mall. They talk in their own teenage dialect, listen to their own music, eat the in food like sushi and value popularity and being able to go to parties at their friends' houses. Their focus is on men. They are concerned more with looks than with a person's character or mental ability. What their friends think is important and fitting in means that they are socially acceptable.

Randy's world is one in which survival and being independent are important. Coming from a poorer area, students at Hollywood High dress quite differently. Black

leather and less conservative clothing along with spiked and dyed hair is more acceptable. They have their own dialect and are more prone to use profanity. Cruising in a car at night and going to a bar with their own type of loud music are shown as part of the Hollywood teen scene. As Randy states, in his world the teens also go to parties and buy clothes. What makes the teenage cultures in the two schools different is the way they do things.

Since the film does not concentrate on the formal aspects of learning, the only scene inside Valley High School is the junior prom. The teacher chaperones are presented in formal attire in keeping with the occasion. They talk and look like conservative adults.

Only three parents are shown in the film. Beth Brent is a very young and attractive mother whose daughter Suzie is Julie's friend. While Suzie is having her party Beth is at the house helping with the food and drinks and looking over the young men. Suzie is comfortable with asking Beth's opinion about a boy she likes. Although this scene seems to indicate that there is a very warm and open mother-daughter relationship between them, it is later revealed that Beth also has aspirations of making her daughter's boyfriend,

Skip, hers as well. Her mentioning the word "plastics" to Skip and her interest in him are reminiscent of the seduction of a young man named Ben by another mother, Mrs. Robinson, in the film The Graduate. In both cases adults are presented as very superficial and only interested in their own needs.

In the case of Julie's parents, while they appear to fit in on the surface, as the film goes on it reveals that her parents are not the typical valley type. Instead of being into money they are more concerned about health, running their own health food store. As former hippies into drugs, sex and "rock 'n' roll" they are presented as much more free spirited and less inclined to follow the normal pattern. They see their youth as a much more wilder time. Having only recently gotten married themselves, they are not worried about traditional morality. As Julie's mother puts it, "Whatever you do is okay with us as long as you don't hurt yourself or others."¹³ Giving Julie "space" to grow and mature and not disturbing her karma, they act more as advisors, rather than authoritarian figures.

¹³Valley Girl, 35 mm, 95 min., Atlantic Film Group Inc., Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, 1983.

When Julie is being pressured to go back to her old Valley High boyfriend by her social group, she goes to her father for advice. Shown seated next to each other the film visually communicates the close relationship that they have. While Julie asks her father if she should leave Randy, because he is socially unacceptable in the way that he talks and dresses, her father asks her if she thinks that is wrong or important. Showing her pictures of the way that he was dressed when he was young, he lets her know that he also looked and acted differently than the main stream culture of his time. As he says, "Sometimes the way things look are not the way things are or the way things are going to turn out. . . . It's what you are that counts. What you stand for."¹⁴ He thus tries to point out to Julie that it is the character of a person that has more value, rather than the way they look. When it comes to Julie's decision about what to do with Randy, her father places the responsibility on her shoulders telling her, "Let me know when you decide."¹⁵

Julie's parents, in contrast to most parents portrayed

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

in films about teenagers, treat her as someone who is capable of making the right decision. They are warm and affectionate to each other and communicate in a way that their daughter understands. Having never completely grown up and conformed to what the rest of the society around them expects, they are able to bridge the generational gap with Julie and provide her with the informal learning that she needs to make the transition into adulthood.

The ending unfortunately requires Randy to fight for Julie's hand. Only after he defeats her former boyfriend does she go back to him. The power of peer pressure and need for social acceptance is thus seen as exerting an enormous amount of influence on teenagers. Doing the right thing is hard to decide at any age and in particular during the high school years.

Teachers

Teachers, also produced in 1984 by Aaron Russo and directed by Arthur Hiller, is a much more serious film by comparison. Attention shifts back to formal education and the question of the responsibility of the school to teach students. Kennedy High School is a large urban school in

the Midwest with a racially mixed student body and staff. Although the school looks clean and generally inviting, there are indications that it is plagued by problems. Before the students can enter the school in the morning the security staff has to open the metal gates that close off all the entrances. Almost immediately a black student appears in the office with a stab wound. A female teacher carries a gun in her briefcase and a narcotics officer poses as a student. Violence and drugs, however, are not key issues. They are presented as part of the normal environment that exists in any large city school.

What is shown as problematic in the beginning of the film is the lack of qualified teachers who are capable of teaching their students. That there is something very wrong is immediately communicated by the fact that ten per cent of the teachers are absent. In trying to cover the classes a regular teacher, Mr. Jurel, is called who we are told often does not come to school on Mondays. Then a mental patient accidentally answers a substitute's phone and comes to teach history at the school without anyone realizing who he is. In such a chaotic atmosphere some students are able to graduate without learning to read or write. The fact that

the administration tolerates this is justified on the basis that all the students have the same opportunity to learn and that about half of them do, despite the problems. The school has neither the time nor the resources to be able to deal with the problems of every single student. It must choose to do what is good for the many and sacrifice the few who are problematic.

Mr. Horn, the principal, is shown to have a limited involvement with the daily workings of the school. He appears as a nice, conservative older principal who leaves the basic work to others in the administration. When things get rough he retreats to his office. Since he does not even know where the files on students are kept, he is of little use in leading the school in any way. As portrayed, he is a kind of weak figure head with no real power and unable to cope with the problems of the high school.

All day to day problems are handled by the vice principal, Mr. Rubel. In a matter of minutes the film has him coping with a stabbed student, lack of teachers, preparing for a lawsuit and dealing with the school psychologist who has a mental breakdown. He views himself as a good guy doing the best he can with limited resources.

Although once a teacher and an idealist concerned with changing education, he is shown as someone who has been corrupted by the very system that he wished to change. The fact that he was not a very good English teacher places his commitment to teaching in question. Although not intentionally portrayed as a bad guy, he is seen as an administrator who has sold out his integrity in order to preserve his position and the status quo of the school. What he says jokingly is that he helps provide a service to the community by keeping the students occupied so they have less time procreating and thereby overpopulating the planet. Like his friend Jurel, he is shown trying to do what he thinks best in a system that is not easily changed.

Miss Burke, as the school superintendent, is portrayed as a strong capable woman whose job is to perpetuate the system, but not concerned with the purpose for which it is intended. While she is happy to go to fundraisers, she is not interested in making sure that the students get a good education. Her position is presented as a political one. She represents the school system in the community. It is up to her to convince the community to pass a bond issue and give the school system more money, because they have faith

that it is doing a good job. Miss Burke is like her lawyer who represents Kennedy High School. Neither are concerned with the truth about the school's ability to teach its students. Covering up the fact that a student graduated without reading or writing skills is seen as part of her job to defend the status quo. When the high school administration is not able to control its teachers, she puts politics above education in trying to have the best teacher fired because he challenges the system to meet the needs of the students and face the truth about its problems.

The teachers in the school represent a wide variety of personalities and teaching styles. An older conservative teacher nicknamed Ditto is proud to have won awards for having the most orderly class. He is representative of a tenured faculty member who has found a way to handle his classes without really teaching. His system involves the ditto machine and preparing work sheets that the students have to fill out every day. Facing the students' desks away from his eliminates all communication. The students pick up the dittos, do the work and leave. As the lyrics of one of the songs asks, "Is this a prison? Some say it is. Some say it isn't." For students in Ditto's classes, school has

become little more than a containment center and Ditto a kind of guard whose presence in the classroom has nothing to do with imparting knowledge.¹⁶

In contrast, the mental patient who accidentally comes as a substitute teacher to a history class makes a far better teacher. He involves the students totally in the learning process as he dresses up like key historical figures and reenacts moments in history. Being a teacher for him is something very important and which he refers to with pride. The film uses him not only as a contrast to Ditto, but also to point up some flaws in the system. When a social studies teacher complains that her students are weak in reading, he suggests that she teach them since she is a teacher. Her answer is that it is not her job. Her position requires that she teach social studies--reading is not her area. Thus what is communicated is that no one wants to take the time or responsibility to help students who have been passed up the system without having the skills necessary to work well at a higher level.

Another older male math teacher, Mr. Rosenberg, seems

¹⁶Teachers, 35 min, 106 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1984.

to like teaching, but has difficulty controlling his class. Reminiscent of the math teacher in Blackboard Jungle he is shown as trying to be nice, but getting little respect from the students--one of whom proceeds to bite his hand and later steals his desk and car. While his intentions are good and he cares about the educational system and students who can't read, he is not shown as a strong leader. When he tells the lawyer taking the deposition for the law suit against the board of education the truth about the school policy of passing even students who rarely attend classes, he does so more out of an inability to lie than from a position of strength. He is shown as the type of teacher who with the right backing would do well, because he still values education.

The main character, Mr. Jurel, is portrayed as a burnt out idealist who after fifteen years in the system doesn't see his teaching as making a difference. He dresses very informally--even coming to school in the middle of winter in a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses to hide his bloodshot eyes. Drinking is his way of blocking out reality. With no family he is a lonely person living from day to day. Although he is supposed to teach social studies, he is shown teaching

the students how to repair the classroom radiator which appears to be broken in the middle of winter. He talks to the students more on the level of a friend than as a teacher. The students understand that he is sensitive to their needs and he becomes the one adult that they risk confiding in. This places him in a position to become a risk taker himself by putting his job in jeopardy to go with a pregnant student to an abortion clinic.

Placed temporarily in the position of a counselor, as well as that of a teacher, he comes face to face with having to deal with the parents of one of his underachieving students, Eddie Pilikian. What the film communicates is the inability of the school system to handle family problems that impact on the learning of their students. Using a divorced family, the film shows the school being asked to police the possible visitation by the father, rather than to consider what is in best educational interests of the child. At the same time the responsibility for teaching is placed squarely on the shoulders of the teacher. The student is presented as a victim of his environment. He has no secure family base from which to operate.

Parents are again shown in a negative way. Mr.

pilikian hits his son and the divorced Mrs. Pilikian refuses to speak with Mr. Jurel about her son's reading problem. While no other parents are shown, the fact that a teenage girl is afraid to tell her parents about her pregnancy follows the pattern of other teenage films where there is a communication gap between high school students and their parents. Eddie as the main student character is the typical male underachiever who is basically a very nice guy. Finding a teacher like Mr. Jurel as a substitute father figure becomes his chance to turn from a life of crime into a useful citizen.

In trying to make education more pertinent to the lives of his students Mr. Jurel asks them for their opinion about what the school's commitment should be to its community--to the students. The film thus brings up the question of students' rights. As a first step towards handling the problem, Jurel asks the students to define it in their own way--to communicate to him in whatever way they can what is wrong with the school. Faced with a writing deficiency, Eddie takes on the challenge using a visual approach through a series of photographs taken throughout the school. By involving a student like Eddie in working on

a problem that can affect his life, the film communicates that it is possible to make a difference with teenagers if a teacher is willing to go beyond the required curriculum and find something pertinent to the students' lives. To change the system also requires that the person who rocks the boat pay the price. In this case, the film tries to show that to do so is taking a difficult path. The administration and other teachers are likely to turn their backs on whoever veers from the accepted methods. Displeasing the administration jeopardizes one's job.

The film also presents a former student as an example of what can be accomplished when inspired by the right kind of teaching. Miss Hammond is a young, beautiful lawyer full of ideas of changing a corrupt educational system. Having been taught by Jurel himself to stand up for what one believes is important, she returns to Kennedy High to put his ideas into practice. As Jurel points out to her, seeing things from an outsider's perspective is not really grasping the problem. In the end, however, she is shown shaking up his complacency and forcing him to think again about teaching. Reaching even one student becomes worth the effort. Although the ending does not present any real

change in the system, it tries to communicate that one teacher committed to his profession can make a difference in the lives of some of the students.

Teachers was meant to appeal to both teenagers and adults, but tends towards adult concerns about educational institutions adequately teaching high school students. In the film, both administrators and parents leave the teachers solely responsible for teaching and are either uncooperative or too occupied with other matters to be of any help. Many teachers tire of fighting what seems to be a losing battle and become gatekeepers. Only an extremely dedicated teacher, as Mr. Dadier in Blackboard Jungle, continues to take risks in order to teach all the students. In the end Jurel, like Dadier, needs the support of a woman to prevent his retreat. While one teacher cannot change the system, one teacher can make a difference in his/her school.

The Breakfast Club

The Breakfast Club was produced by Ted Tanen and John Hughes and written and directed by John Hughes in 1985. Set in Shermer High School, an upper middle class suburban high school outside of Chicago, the film focuses on a group of

students confined to the school for a Saturday detention in 1984. The students represent the school's various subcultures that under ordinary circumstances do not communicate with each other. There is the "princess," the athlete, the "brain," the "basket case" and the criminal. Confined together in the library, they begin to interact, understand each other, and face their own fears and problems. Despite their differences, they all come to realize that what affects their lives the most is their relationship with their parents.

It is clear from the very beginning of the film that each student comes from a distinct world that impacts who they are. As each arrives at the school, the film focuses on their individual circumstances. Claire, the princess, is shown in a BMW. The insignia of the car appears first followed by a wide angle shot of the car indicating its importance in her family's life. Popularity and image are of value. Her father is dressed in the preppy clothes of a wealthy suburban parent.

As a social queen, Claire is upset that her father can't get her out of detention. What she is worried about is her social standing by being classified as a defective.

As he tells her, "Ditching class to go shopping doesn't make you a defective." He is not upset at her actions and is even willing to make it up to her for her having to go through detention. It is clear that Claire is the pampered product of a family concerned with social status and what she did does not detract from her position.¹⁷

In contrast Bryan, the "brain," is brought to school by his mother who drives a nonshowy middle class car. She is dressed in a long down coat that also places her in the less trendy middle class world. As she berates her son saying, "Is this the first time or the last time we do this?", it is clear that detention is something very embarrassing. She expresses anger and insists that her son use the time to study. Her concern is more for herself than for her son. He has let her down. From his plain clothes, slight figure and inability to stand up to his mother, it is shown how he is dominated by his family. This is underscored by having a younger sister in the car who also joins in on her mother's side when he is being

¹⁷The Breakfast Club, 35 mm, 97 min., Universal Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1985.

scolded.¹⁸

Andrew, the athlete, is driven to school by his father in a more sporty middle class car. His father is also shown being very upset at his son. He berates Andrew for getting caught at what he did, rather than for his actions. It is clear that what he is interested in is his son's sports career saying, "You want to miss your match? Do you want to blow your ride? No school is going to give a scholarship to a discipline case."¹⁹

Dressed in a high school athletic jacket, with a patch stating that Andrew is a state champion, indicates that he has a promising sports career. His father, however, dominates the scene showing he is in charge of his son's life. Like Bryan, Andrew is unable to communicate with his parent and is resigned to do what he is told.

Allison, the "basket case," arrives in a luxury car. The scene is shot from a distance to accentuate the lack of communication in her life. She is seated in the back of the car. When she gets out and approaches the front, it pulls

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

away. She is thus left all alone with no one seeming to take any interest in her. In her large coat hugging her purse, she is a figure that visually presents someone lost and abandoned.

Bender, the criminal, is also alone. Arriving on foot he strides across the road with his large frame, long coat and scarf and flannel shirt making a statement about his family's poorer economic situation. Unlike Allison, Bender is presented as a strong figure who cries out for attention. He is the rebel who makes a point of doing things that make him stand apart.

The library of the school ironically represents the prison yard where the students are to be confined for nine hours. Their warden is a teacher named Richard Vernon who immediately tries to establish his authority over the students ordering them not to talk or move from their seats. Both his dress, described by Bender as that of Barry Manilowe, and his attitude represent the gap that exists between him and the students. He is just another adult who doesn't really care about them and is using his position to show his power over their lives. It is thus ridiculous for him to request that the students write an essay revealing

who they are.

As the voice over narration of Bryan has already communicated to Vernon at the beginning of the film, "It's crazy to write an essay telling you who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us--in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. You see us as a 'brain,' an athlete, a 'basket case,' a 'princess,' and a criminal." Vernon is thus no better than any of the parents already presented in the film. He has preconceptions of the students and cannot see beyond them to the individual personality, needs, and desires that each represent.²⁰

The school world mirrors the outside world in stereotyping people and then treating them accordingly. Thus, the educational environment provides no particular insight into how to effectively communicate with the students that it has been charged to teach. The students are like inmates imprisoned in high school. They have no rights and must do as they are told by both the teachers and their parents. The students are a world unto themselves,

²⁰Ibid.

separated from the adults and even further separated from each other by their own classification system within which peer pressure acts as the policing force. Just as certain adult groups would not socialize with each other, so the students representing different high school social groups maintain their own criteria for in group inclusion or exclusion.

Claire is referred to as the princess who belongs to the well dressed, socially active and popular group that believes everyone looks up to them and would want to join their ranks. Her clothes, make up and hair are all acceptable as part of the image she must maintain. Diamond stud earrings are a sign of affluence, which along with her sushi lunch, set her clearly apart from most of the other student groups.

Bryan, as the "brain," is looked upon as a wimp who dresses poorly and has no social life. He visually fits the image in his plain clothing and slight build. His life is focused on getting the best grades and trying to do what his parents want. Even the clubs that he belongs to are academically oriented allowing little opportunity to mix with other types of students.

Andrew, as the athlete, belongs to the jock group whose members are involved with sports. Acting tough and ready to fight is seen as part of their expected response to outsiders. Their macho image is ever on guard against any sexual inferences of homosexuality. They are also classified as less intelligent, but, having a high social status within the school, they can acceptably socialize with the princess types.

The "basket case" designation applied to Allison is more of an individual label for someone who acts crazy or looks weird. As a nonsocial type, she does not belong to any group as such. Allison is thus depicted as an isolated world onto herself. Her dark makeup, hair covering her face, large purse, large voluminous coat all communicate that she is depressed and hiding from the world. Biting her nails, she directs her tensions inward. Her lunch is altered to suit her image as she tosses the lunch meat out of her sandwich and adds sugar and popcorn. Hardly uttering a sound, she is someone another teenager would not want to be associated with in public.

The film tries to put her in an artsy group category. When asked to write an essay she begins to draw a covered

bridge indicating that she has creative potential. Her lack of concern about her outward appearance would fit right in with the image that many people have of artists. Isolated from both students and parents, her drawings are her means of communication with the outside world.

Bender as the criminal type is the juvenile delinquent who is always getting into trouble. His rough blue collar style of dress places him as a social outcast in a suburban high school where the majority of students come from middle class and fairly well off families. Throughout the film he tries to verbally attack the other students--particularly the socially established princess and athlete. Being looked down upon and not belonging, he is categorized as the revolutionary type who tries to tear down that which has no place for him. As Claire and Andrew insightfully see, Bender doesn't belong anywhere so he dumps on everything.

Bender, however, becomes instrumental in helping the students break down the artificial barriers that separate them and begin to reveal who they really are. What the film seems to be communicating is that to change their lives students must become risk takers and challenge the things that stand in the way of their happiness. Following the

status quo and what adults want is being led to follow in the footsteps of those one wants to get away from. This is particularly true with regard to parents whom the students blame for their unhappy state.

The lack of communication with one's parents is an important theme in the film. Both Andrew and Bryan are pushed by their parents to be what their parents want them to be. Andrew tells how he hates his father who has become like a mindless machine that he can't relate to any more. All his father is interested in is for Andrew to be number one--a winner. He won't tolerate losers nor even consider what Andrew would like to be in life. For Bryan failure is not getting all "A's." An "F" in shop is like a death sentence. He is driven to be academically successful and obviously has no parental support to handle his feelings of failure.

Claire's parents use her to get back at each other in what is an unhappy marriage. With an alcoholic mother living away from home and the continual talk of divorce, all feelings of security are lost. Her sense of belonging is thus tied to maintaining her place in her social group, despite not wanting to be pressured by her peers to do what

they want.

Allison, on the other hand, does whatever she wants since she belongs to no group and is completely ignored by her parents. As it turns out, she comes to detention voluntarily having nothing else to do. She needs the company of others of her age and just being in the same room with other students gives her a sense of belonging.

Although Bender never reveals why he has been assigned to detention, his actions indicate that he is seen as a trouble maker and targeted for punishment. Unable to control his temper he lashes out at Vernon, just as his father has lashed out at him. It is obvious from his mimicking his relationship with his father that he comes from a lower class home where physical abuse is part of his everyday life. The film also visually underscores his situation by having him show the other students the cigar burn he received as punishment for spilling a can of paint. After this disclosure, he throws things around in the library to show his pain.

The importance of sexuality in a teenager's life is well understood by Bender who makes numerous sexual remarks to provoke Claire and Andrew. Despite the sexual

revolution, the film communicates that not all teenage girls are engrossed with having sexual relations without some feelings for the other person. Also girls are penalized no matter whether they are virgins or not. Added to the old stigma that girls that do are sluts is the idea that girls who don't are prudes. It is a no-win situation either way.

The film also tries to portray the athlete image as one that has a great deal of sensitivity towards others, rather than the stereotypical one of an unfeeling brute. Andrew confides that while driven to present a macho image to his dad by ganging up against another weak looking athlete and taping his buns together, he is ashamed of his actions. Mentally realizing the humiliation that the person must have endured by being branded as weak and having to confront his own father, Andrew shows he is compassionate. This is again portrayed as he tries to get Allison to talk about her troubled family.

Even Bender in his own way has a compassionate and sensitive side that is revealed during the film. As the students cover for him when he is being pursued by Vernon, he in turn covers for them when they try to return to the library after having left without permission. Later, he

reminds Andrew about the hurtful comments that he made about him--his not even existing at the school and that if he disappeared no one would care. He also points up the large difference between the worlds from which the different students come--particularly when it come to Claire and himself. While Claire's father gave her diamond earrings for Christmas, his father gave him a carton of cigarettes.

During the course of the film, the teenagers grow closer together as they begin to communicate. Using marijuana in a kind of ritualistic way, they begin to dance and talk expressing themselves without fear of the consequences. Allison opens up verbally and Claire takes her aside for an image transformation redoing her hair and dress. Everyone talks about their parents and no one makes fun of those who reveal their feelings. The importance of peer relationships are thus underscored.

What becomes a crucial point is whether being together for one day will be enough to break the social barriers between them once they go back to the larger high school world on Monday. Bryan in particular is distraught at the idea of losing the friendship that they have established. While Claire believes that peer pressure will be too hard to

resist on her part, it is she who ultimately takes a risk by giving Bender her diamond earring.

Within the formal structure of a high school and in the repository of learning--the library--the students thus learn in an informal way that which is crucial for their lives. Not only do they leave with a better understanding of who they are, but also the knowledge that they are no longer all alone in their struggle to reach adulthood, without becoming carbon copies of their parents.

The only person who learns nothing from the day at school is Richard Vernon. Talking with Carl, the janitor, after being caught going through the students' confidential files, he reveals his disillusionment with the teaching profession. After twenty-two years he sees the students becoming more arrogant and making fun of him. As Carl tries to tell him, the problem is not necessarily the students, but himself. It is he who has changed over the years. His expectation of teaching was that it was going to be fun. When it turned out to be hard work it affected his attitude towards his job.

What the film communicates through Carl is that Vernon needs to have some perspective on why the students treat him

the way they do as he says, "If you were sixteen what would you think of you?" As Vernon replies, "Do you think I care what these kids think of me?" it is obvious that he does. He can not relate to the students because he no longer is able to see them as individuals. Perceiving them in terms of stereotypes makes it difficult for Vernon to effectively communicate. Since the school system maintains a separation between student and teacher, unless Vernon wants to break through the social barrier and get to know the students as individuals, he will always be trapped by his own point-of-view.²¹

Of all the adults in the film, only Carl is able to deal with the students and Vernon effectively. As he says to the students, he is the eyes and ears of the school. Being an invisible entity in their world, he is in a unique position to observe what is going on. Unfortunately having no direct connection with their education, he has no real impact on their lives. It is up to them to help each other by keeping the lines of communication open between them.

The analysis of films representing the white public

²¹Ibid.

school experience from 1980 to 1985 indicates the presence of the three major themes of the "teenage education" genre prototypes. Social acceptance is very important and being in or out of a peer group a major teenage concern.

Teenagers belong to their own subculture which has its own language, dress and modes of behavior. This culture is divided by the 1980s into distinct groups which are highly segregated. Cross generational communication, or the lack thereof, is very important.

In the majority of films, the white public school remains a middle or upper middle class experience. Men dominate at the student, parent, teacher/coach and administrative level. Although women are present in all the films, their importance tends to be balanced by the actions of men. Valley Girl, for example, begins by focusing on the life of a female student. As the film progresses her new boyfriend becomes her mentor introducing her to his teenage culture. When she has to make a difficult decision about her relationship, she seeks her father's advice. In sexploitation films like Hollywood High, Part II women seem to dominate--but only to fulfill teenage male fantasies about being seduced by attractive women teachers.

Female students are portrayed as mainly concerned with being popular and supportive of their boyfriends. The only ones who are interested in formal education are in the arts --drama and music. Male students on the other hand outwit the school bullies, win college football scholarships, succeed in rescuing the women of their dreams from the clutches of the powerful and popular school elite. Only a handful are interested in formal education. Those who are intellectually bright or artistic are social outcasts.

The only and/or motherless child is the norm. While a few students like Clifford in My Bodyguard and Stefan in All the Right Moves, have warm and supportive fathers, most are left to fend for themselves. Parents are generally portrayed as away from home or not someone with whom students can communicate. Only in Valley Girl are both parents concerned about their teenage daughter, Julie. As former hippies who rebelled against their own parents during the 1960s experimenting with drugs and free love, they are far from the more typical type of parent portrayed in other films during the early 1980s. In contrast to their importance, Julie's boyfriend's parents do not appear to exist. The absence of parents or parental communication

makes peer belonging even more necessary for teenagers who are often placed in situations that they are not sure how to handle. Just as Jim found himself without parental guidance at a crucial time in his life in Rebel without a Cause, so too do most of the student-heroes of these films.

The majority of high schools are portrayed as environments that are free from drugs and violence. They function as places for students of all backgrounds to meet and socialize. Only the students in Fame are shown as concerned about their formal education.

Three schools depict some violence, which mostly involves white students. In My Bodyguard students are roughed up for their lunch money. While the administration is aware of the problem, it leaves it up to the students to handle the situation. Teachers begins by showing a black student who has a knife wound. The absence of any real concern indicates that violence in this high school is part of the normal pattern and not something that the school is concerned about. Only in Class of 1984 is the high school portrayed as a violent drug infested place where staying alive comes before education. Neither the adults within the school or outside are effective in providing those students

who want to learn with a safe environment. The school is likened to a prison and references are made to Nazi Germany.

While principals in some high schools try to communicate with their students as in My Bodyguard and High School USA, it is ultimately up to the students to fend for themselves. The principals in Class of 1984 and Teachers have no real control over what happens in their schools and the majority of teachers are presented as apathetic to the educational needs of the students. Under such conditions teacher-heroes are shown as needed to restore order by focusing the school on its primary responsibility--adequately preparing its students to function in adult society. Just as Dadier in Blackboard Jungle had to find a way to teach without administrative or parental support, so too do the teachers in these films.

While the teacher-heroes are portrayed in a positive light, teachers are usually shown in a negative way. They are portrayed as caricatures, objects of male fantasies, weak, and generally unable to relate to teenagers. Only three male teachers and one female teacher are presented as married.

Stress on formal education in order to go to college

is not a concern in the early 1980s. Students who have college aspirations like Mason in Tex and Stefan in All the Right Moves use their athletic skills to get scholarships. Going to college is viewed as a ticket out of poverty.

The majority of students portrayed have limited academic goals making formal education not a priority. Although some of the students are bright, they are underachievers in a school setting. Jay Jay in High School USA is only willing to work hard when it comes to fixing his car so he can win a race that will give him social status among his peers and help win the girl of his dreams. David, as the computer whiz who is able to access the military's top secret computer, shows no interest in doing well in his high school classes.

Teenage life in these films centers around informal learning and belonging to a peer group. Being socially acceptable is a primary concern. Even the students who have loving parents realize that there are some things that they must handle on their own. For students who lack an adult support system, peer groups function as a pseudo family with whom students can communicate. Just as Plato in Rebel without a Cause sought not to be a man alone, so too do

teenagers in the films from 1980 to 1985.

Teenage education films produced during the last half of the 1980s increase in number and complexity. While informal learning continues to be important, several films also stress the importance of formal education. There is less concern with sex and more on having a good relationship. Violence and drugs in a white public high school setting are no longer an issue. Cross generational communication, teenage culture and peer group affiliation remain the major themes.

CHAPTER 5

THE WHITE EXPERIENCE CONTINUED: 1986-1989

This chapter will continue the description and interpretation of films made from 1986 to 1989 which deal with the teenage education experience by looking at what is communicated verbally and nonverbally. Like the previous chapter, it will look at Hollywood films which depict the white public school experience. The attitudes and values expressed in the films and the depiction of the school and major participants, as well as any educational questions raised will be examined.

Lucas

Lucas, produced by David Nicksay and directed by David Seltzer in 1986, takes place in a wealthy suburb in the Midwest. The main character Lucas is a bright teenager who goes to Park High School. He belongs to the nonjock social group called the "geeks" which includes the academically inclined students who dress less fashionably and are into

other things besides athletics. Lucas is small built, wears glasses, is interested in insects, and carries around a tape recorder with a cassette of recorded classical music to listen to. He is the basic loner type with no mother, an alcoholic father who is never seen, and lives in the poorest area--a trailer park.

The film focuses on the importance of peer acceptance and the informal learning aspects of a high school environment. High school is presented as a critical period. Just as a locust is seen emerging from a cocoon and getting ready to fly into adulthood, so Lucas is in a state of being prepared for manhood. His encounter with a new high school girl named Maggie starts the process. Although younger, Lucas becomes her mentor for the summer introducing her to insects and classical music. Outside of the high school and on a one-to-one basis he functions well. His problems begin when school starts and Lucas is thrust into an environment that includes other peer subgroups--particularly the jock group associated with football. Maggie falls in love with Cappie, the captain of the football team. This creates a crisis for Lucas because he wants to keep her affection.

The importance of the football team in high school and

its relatively high status is communicated early as the students are introduced to the school through a pep rally. To show how Lucas is different one of the members of the football team makes fun of him as he brings him up on stage in the school auditorium to be presented to the school along with the team. Later the film continues to show the contrast between the jocks on the football team and Lucas and his friends. In the cafeteria Lucas's friends discuss the suicide of a teacher. Rina, a quiet shy girl who likes Lucas, talks about it being romantic and brings up literature that she is reminded of--Romeo and Juliet and the poetry of Keats and Shelly. At the same time the football players are seen competing with each other by using their muscles to squeeze oranges. Later while Lucas listens to classical music sitting alone by a pond in old clothes, the football players are shown hitting each other on the field.

For Lucas there is no adult help in trying to be accepted as a part of the jock group. Not only are there no parental support figures, but he has already been embarrassed by his father coming to school. The football coach does not want him on the team. While Lucas complains that the equipment doesn't fit him, the coach tries to make

him understand that he is just not suited for football by telling him, "It's you who don't fit." To further emphasize this fact Lucas is confronted by the school itself in the person of Mr. Kaiser who refuses to let him play until he talks with Lucas' parents stating: "I'm doing you a favor Lucas. You're not cut out for this."¹

The film tries to make a parallel between the teacher who has committed suicide when he wasn't accepted by the woman he cared for, and Lucas' attempt to play football despite his physical disadvantage in one last attempt to prove himself worthy of Maggie. While injured, he is fortunate to survive. Lucas is able to win acceptance by the students in the school because he is willing to risk physical injury on the football field in trying to help the team. Although the team doesn't win, Lucas does. Everyone is touched by his attempt. As a symbol of his acceptance by the jocks he is given a football jacket and applauded by the students.

What the film communicates is that high school society can be very segregated in terms of belonging to certain peer

¹Lucas, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox, Los Angeles, Calif., 1986.

groups. Physical ability and mental ability are further factors that divide. School popularity focuses more on physical ability and looks at the bright students as strange. This is particularly problematic for boys. The only way to succeed for them is to be able to meet a physical test which shows that they are worthy of respect.

The film also shows the importance of peer friendship --particularly when someone has no parental support. While we are never directly told why Lucas helped Cappie with his school work when he was sick, it is reasonable to assume that Lucas recognized him as someone with whom he should be friends. The fact that Cappie then becomes his friend is very important. He not only functions as a crucial person for acceptance to the jock group but as an older brother/father type who will defend Lucas when needed. Maggie also functions as an older sister/mother type who is sensitive to Lucas' needs and is there for him. This is particularly represented after Lucas is knocked out on the football field and taken to the hospital. Maggie leans over Lucas' bed looking like a mother overseeing her sick child. Cappie and Maggie are a kind of pseudo family structure as were Jim and Judy in Rebel without a Cause. Lucas is their

plato. They try to help him when possible.

The school, as presented, seems to be a very good one with the students participating in a variety of activities. The teachers and staff have control and there is no mention of any one except the new band teacher being disliked. While drinking is alluded to by the cheerleaders, the film does not bring up any real problems. The football coach is the only teacher that is focused on. Although he tries to sound tough he is represented as a fairly normal person who just wants his team to win and is easily manipulated by Lucas.

The only parent who appears briefly is Maggie's mother. She seems to be very warm and loving as portrayed. The film continues the pattern of showing only children and concentrates on the fact that peer learning and relationships are far more important to teenagers than the academic side of high school.

Peggy Sue Got Married

Peggy Sue Got Married, produced by Paul R. Gurian and directed by Francis Ford Coppola in 1986, involves a look back into the past of a forty-three year old woman named

Peggy Sue who collapses during her twenty-fifth annual high school reunion. As an adult reliving the life of a teenager, she is in a unique position to see things from a better perspective. What is communicated as the most important aspect of high school life is informal learning from peer interaction. Placed back in 1960 her family, friends, and boyfriend are what are foremost in her mind.

The film communicates the love and warmth in her home and the importance of her mother and grandparents. She is portrayed as popular and surrounded by many friends. As a teenager growing up in a time of peace and stability, Peggy Sue is a warm and open individual who seems secure in herself. Her future is fairly predictable. She has a popular boyfriend, Charlie Bodell, and girl friends who are anticipating getting married and living close by. With expectations consistent with the time, Peggy Sue values good peer relationships and family.

Education is not presented as important for the majority of students in the high school. To underscore this point Peggy Sue makes a comment about learning algebra. She tells her friends that they will never use the knowledge. Later when her mother asks her about how her day was at

school Peggy Sue replies, "I don't know. Everything they teach is so useless."²

While the film communicates that a high school education is not valued, there is a different attitude towards college. Peggy Sue urges Charlie to change the course of his life saying, "You have to go to college and finish." Without such an education Charlie ends up exactly like his dad, selling appliances and chasing women around the store.³

Only one student, Richard Norvik, is portrayed as anticipating going to college. The rest, like Peggy Sue, have no such expectations. The girls are mainly interested in getting married. Charlie also has no college plans and wants to pursue a singing career. Even a student like Michael Fitzsimmons who shows promise as a writer, can't wait to get his freedom from high school and go out west where he can live on a farm and write.

Richard Norvik is a bright science student who is portrayed as short, thin, and wearing glasses. The other

²Peggy Sue Got Married, 35 mm, 104 min., Tri-Star Pictures, Culver City, Calif., 1986.

³Ibid.

students think he is weird and tend to avoid him. Not having any social life he spends his time doing science projects. Being intelligent is thus portrayed in a negative way. It makes one a social outcast at a time when having a social life and preparing for adult relationships are important.

Michael Fitzsimmons is also shown as a dark brooding loner who is not afraid to contradict his English teacher about an interpretation of Old Man and the Sea. In an era when conformity is important his actions separate him from the rest of the students. They refer to him as a "commie geek" and he thinks of them as sheep happily being led and having no independent spirit. While the other students go out on dates and party, he sits in a diner drinking coffee, smoking a cigarette, and reading a book. Like other teenage rebels, he is alienated from his family and their values. As he tells Peggy Sue, his father is only interested in money and all his mother cares about is her standing at the country club.⁴

A contrast is made on the difference in peer social

⁴Ibid.

acceptance during the high school years and as an adult. The same bright student who was shunned in 1960 becomes the king of the party twenty-five years later. What is valued, however, is not the fact that Richard is bright, but the fact that he has used his intelligence to become famous and monetarily successful. While in the past he, along with Michael, was shown dressed in dark clothing in sharp contrast to the lighter colors of the other students, he appears at the reunion in colors similar to the rest of the men.

Only two high school teachers are shown. They are both male, conservatively dressed, and wear glasses. The algebra teacher has on a dark brown suit and thus contrasts with the brighter and lighter colors of the students. This matches his more stern appearance. While little time is spent on his character, the impression made is that he is very serious and not approachable by the students.

The English teacher, in comparison, is in lighter clothing and shown responding to Michael's criticism of Hemingway. While he is thus portrayed as more open, it is obvious from his dialogue that his traditional and accepted interpretation of The Old Man and the Sea is not likely to

change despite Michael's attempts to put down Hemingway. The teacher's placement behind his desk also communicates that there is a clear separation between teachers and students. This helps support the idea that there is little connection between the formal education in the school and the lives of the students outside the school.

Since the only parents seen in the film are Peggy Sue's, the only interpretation that can be made is that loving parents are important in a teenager's life. Perhaps even more important are grandparents. Bathed in warm yellow light they appear almost angelic. They not only are willing to listen to her, but her grandfather tries to help her. Their presence is also a key to feelings of family. As Peggy Sue mentions to her grandfather, after they die the extended family members no longer see each other. For teenagers growing up in a world where they have to make many decisions that affect their lives, having adults in a close knit family who can be relied on and with whom they can communicate with is seen as a tremendous advantage.

While Peggy Sue Got Married is a nostalgic look at the past, it underscores the teenage view of high school education as being useless. Peer acceptance continues to be

the dominating factor in life with bright students being treated as social outcasts. Adult communication is limited and of little help in providing teenagers with the kind of education that they need to make the transition into adulthood.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off

Ferris Bueller's Day Off was produced by John Hughes and Tom Jacobson and written and directed by John Hughes in 1986. Ferris Bueller is a high school senior who arranges to take a day off from school and enjoy life. The film contrasts the restrictive and boring school environment with the wonderful fun experiences that Ferris has on a trip to Chicago. It also shows how important peer influence can be as Ferris helps Cameron, his best friend, face the problems he has with his father and begin to deal with them.

The school setting is in an affluent suburb of Chicago where the students attend a clean, bright, and safe environment. The focus in the school is on academics and preparing the students to go to college. The school, however, is also presented as a kind of prison where dull, boring teachers talk about things that the students do not

feel are relevant. The Dean of Students, Mr. Rooney, is the warden who relishes in finding truant students and punishing them. His secretary, Miss Grace, is a nice contrast with her directness and obvious liking of Ferris.

To present the absence of any real communication between the teachers and their students two older conservatively dressed teachers are shown in their classes. The film gives a series of close-ups of the teachers and then shows the complete lack of interest on the part of the students. The teachers' voices are both very monotone. The history teacher has a monologue going supplying the answers to the questions that he asks when the students do not respond. His subject matter dealing with governmental actions in 1930 to relieve the Depression seems to have no relevance to the students. Having already been told by Ferris that he has a test on a subject that he does not see ever being useful in his life, the audience is predisposed to listening to the teachers from his point of view.

Although Ferris and his friends state that they are going to college, they do not seem to be strongly motivated to learn. Going to college is seen as something that they are expected to do. His friends both indicate that they are

interested in nothing. What is problematic for Ferris is that college marks a break in his friendship. Everyone will be going to different schools. For Ferris, taking a day off from high school is his way of having one last chance to be with the people he cares about before approaching adulthood, as well as his last chance of helping his friend Cameron.

The film shows a wide gap between the teenage world and that of the adults. In the teenage world it is important to have fun and enjoy the moment. In the adult world, people are seen as having little time to stop and see what is around them before it disappears.

Ferris is a catalyst who makes things happen. As Grace informs Mr. Rooney, Ferris is very popular and liked by all the peer subgroups at school. Ferris is also very creative outside school. He is able to fool his parents about being sick and uses his computer and electronic knowledge to help his girlfriend, Sloan, get out of school as well. After getting his friend Cameron, who is always sick, to leave his house and come over, Ferris has him pretend to be Sloan's father on the phone with Mr. Rooney. As a comedy, the film makes no issue about the need for a teenager to have a sense of morality--in particular as

Ferris changes the number of days that he is absent on the school computer and dupes various adults into believing what he wants them to. Like Alex in High School USA, he is also able to convince his best friend to let him borrow his father's car to go to Chicago even though it would be against Cameron's father's wishes.

In Chicago, Ferris visits the Sears Tower, Stock Exchange, and the Art Institute--all places with a great deal of educational potential. Unlike a regulated school field trip, however, Ferris and his friends enjoy themselves while spontaneously experiencing and learning from what each place has to offer. This is visually expressed as they join hands with younger children who are linked together as they follow their teacher from room to room looking at art. A scene in an expensive restaurant also shows how Ferris is already very knowledgeable about handling adults as he is able to outwit the maitre'd and obtain a table without having reservations. Ironically the maitre'd looks a great deal like Mr. Rooney who throughout the film tries to catch Ferris lying about being home sick.

The highlight of the trip to Chicago is Ferris on a float in a German American parade singing an old song "Twist

and Shout." As the members of the parade, the onlookers, judges, and even Ferris' father who is nearby in his office join in dancing and twisting, the scene visually communicates a celebration of life and enjoying the moment. While the film at this point is like a fantasy come true, it also has a more serious aspect. Ferris is concerned about Cameron and being prepared for the future. This day and dedicating a song at the parade for him are ways to give him a good time he will remember and in some way help him overcome his fears and be ready for college.

Ferris and Sloan are a kind of pseudo family for Cameron. As the film communicates Cameron is an only child who lives in a glass house full of things that can't be touched. Unlike Ferris' parents, Cameron's parents hate each other and have never loved their son. The only important thing in Cameron's father's life is his car. Under such circumstances Ferris fears the worst for Cameron. Ferris thus tries to teach Cameron to enjoy life and to realize that his continued illnesses are all part of his way of coping with his fears and feeling inadequate.

The importance of peer learning is highlighted towards the end of the film when Cameron and Ferris Bueller's

sister, Jeanie, both come to face things that bother them in their lives. Unable to put back the odometer on his father's car when he returns home, Cameron realizes that he cannot hide his use of it. As he says to Ferris:

I'm bullshit. I put up with everything. My old man pushes me around and I never say anything. I'm going to take a stand. . . . My father will come home see what I did. He'll have to deal with me. I'm tired of being afraid.⁵

In the end everyone is happy except Mr. Rooney who is unable to discredit Ferris' alibi about being sick. The school system is no match for the ability of Ferris. Unlike most teenage characters, Ferris has a nice warm family with parents who love him and a sister who eventually comes to his aid. When his mother asks him, "How did you get to be so sweet?" he replies, "Years of practice." The underlying message is that Ferris has come from a supportive environment where he has been able to learn the positive ways of dealing with people--both his own age and adults. It is this learning which is of value to him rather than that which he gets in school. Social learning is far more important for him, Cameron and his sister, because it

⁵Ferris Bueller's Day Off, 35 mm, 104 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1986.

directly deals with life and with the immediate problems teenagers face.⁶

Summer School

Summer School, produced by George Shapiro and Howard West and directed by Carl Reiner in 1987, is a teenage comedy that manages to bridge the generation gap both within the film and outside in appealing to adult and teenage audiences. Set in California, the film tells the story of a high school coach, Mr. Freddy Shoop, who is forced to teach remedial English during the summer. Not only is he faced with teaching a subject in which he has no training but also a group of students who are not interested in learning.

Mr. Shoop is a relatively young and single teacher. As the film begins he is seen wearing a Hawaiian shirt and looking forward to summer in Hawaii. Freddy is portrayed as a former surfer who enjoys life and has no interest in the academic side of high school. What he values are teamwork and sportsmanship. Since he sees grades as important only to the individual students themselves, he lets the members of his class determine their own grade. This makes him well

⁶Ibid.

liked by the students.

The school, Oceanfront High, is presented as clean, bright, and free of any major problems such as violence or drugs. It is clear that the teachers are anxious to leave for the summer and are not at all willing to teach if they don't have to. The regular English teacher is shown engrossed in rubbing off lottery tickets in his classroom. When he wins \$50,000, he informs the administration that he will not keep his word to teach in the summer. As the Vice Principal, Mr. Gills, tries to reason with him, the film communicates the attitude that some teachers have about education. When it comes to a choice between money and commitment to education, money is of more value.

Shoop is not able to elude Mr. Gills, who has been told by the principal to find an English teacher. There is no concern about the fact that Shoop is unqualified. While Shoop protests saying, "I'm not a real teacher." Mr. Gills responds, "These are not real students. They are unmotivated, irresponsible, not too bright. They'll relate to you." What is being communicated is that teaching athletics is not equated the same as teaching academic subjects. Not only does Shoop see himself as different, but

the administration also sees teaching physical education as less demanding.⁷

The school, as represented by the vice principal, has given up on a group of students who have been unable to pass the minimum skills test in English. They are the kind of students who generally would fall through the cracks and finish high school without attaining the basic writing and reading skills needed to function well in society. Having his hands tied by the district's new policy concerning minimum academic efficiency, Mr. Gills has to provide a teacher for the students. What he is looking for, however, is a babysitter rather than someone who would really be able to provide the students with the kind of education that they really need.

The students in Mr. Shoop's class represent a cross section of teenage problems. There is the football player who is not too bright, a pregnant student, a young man with a night job that makes him too tired to pay attention in class, a dyslexic who has not been diagnosed as such, a surfer who lives for the sport, a nerd that is a social

⁷Summer School, 35 mm, 98 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987.

outcast, and two friends who are into horror films and alcohol. None of the students are interested in learning nor seem to see any value in academics. Since they are not disruptive or violent, they are the kind of students that teachers would generally ignore.

The only advice that Shoop is given by Mr. Gills to help him teach is to immediately show the students who is in charge. This goes against Shoop's easy going attitude. The result is that the students begin to take control trying to find ways to get out of class. After several unsuccessful attempts to do anything with the students, Shoop declares that "We're stuck here--trapped like some rats." The school thus is again likened to a kind of prison. This is an attitude that does not promote learning. What the students seek is a way out and to have fun. Going on field trips is their answer.⁸

While the field trips may seem a waste of time, they give both teacher and students an opportunity to know each other better by interacting in a friendly social environment. This is important because Shoop is able to

⁸Ibid.

understand them better as individuals and realize that they are not the social deviants that the vice principal believes they are. As he later tells Mr. Gills, "Some of those deviants are great kids. They're as smart as you and me."⁹

The field trips, however, do not address the students' English needs, an academic problem which requires formal instruction. The film uses a grandmother's complaint about her grandson's lack of quality education to make the school focus on its intended responsibility. Shoop is then placed in the position of leaving or taking his educational responsibility seriously. His choice is to teach. This is visually marked by his coming to class dressed in a suit and tie. Even though the students understand that the clothes communicate a more serious undertaking, they are not sufficient to make them want to learn.

While Shoop is finally challenged to learn to teach remedial English because his job is on the line, the students are motivated to learn because they can see some immediate value in trying. The students no longer feel that they are in a prison. They help set up the terms of their

⁹Ibid.

learning contract. Each needs help in a particular way and Shoop is willing to go beyond what is normally expected of a teacher. Continued interaction on two levels, in and out of school, also provides Shoop with opportunities to see the problems that the students face.

What is communicated is the need to bridge the generational gap between teacher and students and to take the time to really understand them as individuals in order to teach teenagers who are not very motivated. When they get out of hand, Shoop is able to communicate what he sees as problematic in language they can understand. He tells a student nicknamed Chainsaw who wants to drink and drive, that alcohol kills his brain cells and if he loses one more he will be a talking monkey. In dealing with a young surfer named Pam, he uses a surfing metaphor to let her know that their relationship is not to go beyond what is proper between a teacher and student. With Denise, who is dyslexic, he finds help but leaves it up to her to use it.

Shoop states in the beginning of the film, "Inside every so called bad kid is a good kid just waiting for someone to reach on down through the sleaze and the slime, pick him up, and hose him off." This view of the students

allows him to see the students as having the potential to do well in school. As he states to the vice principal, "Some are great kids." His belief in them is a key ingredient in their ability to succeed.¹⁰

What the film also shows is that teachers may be placed in positions where they are expected to teach courses without any prior training. There is no formal inservice instruction available. It is up to the kindness of other teachers to help. In this case a history teacher, Miss Bishop, comes to his aid telling him:

The easiest thing for you to do is plan your lesson plans on the students' own experiences. Your life's probably very similar. The best teachers are the teachers who entertain while they teach so you should do just fine.¹¹

Taking her advice, he finds things important to the students to motivate them. Starting from a common experience--that of feeling like one has been ripped off by a company that sells a poor product, he begins to lead them to the idea that for them learning to write is critical because it will empower them in the adult world to do things

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

like obtain free products through complaint letters.

While Shoop becomes self motivated in learning to be a good teacher and even goes to jail to help two of his students when they are caught drinking, the students are not willing to put in extra effort to learn. What is communicated is that learning requires not only a good teacher but the participation of self-motivated students as well. Bribing students as Shoop does to get them to participate at first may be necessary, but eventually the price becomes too high. For learning to take place the students must value what is being taught.

A contrast is made between Shoop's approach to teaching and that of the vice principal who takes over his class after Shoop quits. While Shoop is laid back and more informal, he involves the students in the learning process. Mr. Gills on the other hand is more rigid and formal. He has the students open a chapter and start to read silently to themselves even if they have already done the work. Their subsequent humming communicates that this is boring and that they are not going to listen. Students like these need far more creative ways of learning.

Shoop's helping the students outside the school

eventually pays back when they come to him for help, realizing that they can't pass the test without him. Having become self-motivated, they are willing to put effort in the learning process. One teacher, however, is not always enough to help with students who require a great deal of extra help. Through a series of shots, the film shows a variety of adults responding to the needs of the teenagers. What is communicated is that an adult support structure is often critical to providing an environment conducive to learning.

Unlike other films portraying parents in a negative way, Summer School presents them as fairly normal. They are very supportive of their children and see the benefits of Mr. Shoop's teaching. When he is threatened with being fired after not reaching Mr. Gill's requirements that all students pass the basic skills makeup test, the parents show up at the school to ask for his retention.

The principal, Mr. Kelban, is portrayed as an older conservative man who is willing to listen to the parents and Mr. Shoop. While seen briefly, he is shown to be fairminded and in control of the situation. Rather than concentrating on the negative aspects of the test results that show some

students didn't pass, he focuses on the positive. Looking at the individual circumstances and noting the scores obtained, he sees that overall there was a tremendous difference. Principal Kelban then concludes, "But there's more going on here than test scores and grades. You all worked hard and you improved. Now that's teaching." He thus communicates that teaching cannot be judged by the students receiving a certain score. What must be looked at is the individual's progress. If a significant improvement is shown, it signifies that the teacher imparting knowledge is doing a good job. Shoop succeeds in teaching because he believes in the students and is able to bridge the cross generational communication gap.¹²

Three O'Clock High

Three O'Clock High was produced by David E. Vogel and directed by Phil Joanou in 1987. It's main setting is Weaver High School, located in what appears to be a city in the west. (The film was shot in Ogden, Utah.) While a few black students are shown in the background, the school is presented as mainly a middle class white high school. The

¹²Ibid.

focus of the film is on a fight scheduled to take place between two students at three o'clock after school. A parallel is drawn from the very beginning between what is being communicated to the student body by the school with regard to violence and the fate of Jerry, the main teenage character, who has to fight with a new student, Buddy Revell, after making the mistake of accidentally touching him.

In building up enthusiasm for the upcoming football game there are signs posted around Weaver High School using the words: "kill," "annihilate," and "skin" the Panthers. During a pep rally the cheerleaders beat a dummy dressed as one of the opposing team with baseball bats while the crowd chants "Kill him." During a science class the students watch a film about insects which tells them that, "The normal flow of life sometimes includes violence and aggression." Then a crab scorpion is shown attacking a small harmless cricket which they are told is no match for the scorpion and unable to avoid the inevitable fight. Later in another class the teacher recites a passage from the book, The Iliad, which tells about a fight between the Greek warrior Achilles and Hector, the Trojan warrior:

Achilles struck Hector in the throat with a spear. His body spewed blood in all directions. The crowd roared with pleasure. The moment of truth had come. Even as Hector begged for mercy Achilles lashed Hector to his chariot and dragged Hector around the city finally leaving his body to be mutilated by wild dogs. Hector's destiny had finally come to pass.¹³

The students in Weaver High School are thus being taught and exposed to violence as a way of life. The school condones expressions like "kill" and "skin" when applied to another football team. The opposing team has an animal name so it can be viewed as less than human, thereby making the expressions acceptable to civilized society. Beating a dummy is also shown--visually communicating that it is all right to hurt one's enemy.

The lesson on insects is carefully chosen to verbally reinforce the idea that violence and aggression are simply part of the way of life. The weak cricket is a reminder of Jerry who looks small and weak and who is afraid to fight. The crab scorpion on the other hand stands for the more aggressive Buddy who will not let Jerry get out of fighting him. The film thus communicates that sometimes fighting is

¹³Three O'Clock High, 35 mm, 95 min., Universal Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1987.

in the natural order of things and there is no way to avoid it. Some insects, just as some people, are more aggressive, physically powerful, and more likely to win a battle.

While Jerry struggles to avoid the fight that he accidentally is dragged into, there is no way he can convince Buddy not to fight him. It is as if he is fated to face Buddy. Reciting the fight scene between Achilles and Hector, the English teacher also communicates to the students that violence portrayed in great works of art, is an important part of our culture. If one is destined to fight there is nothing that one can do to stop it. The passage also supports the idea that the masses enjoy watching a violent act.

As the film shows, the high school is a microcosm of the outside world and reflects many of its beliefs and values. Both worlds view violence as a way of life and under certain circumstances both condone and enjoy watching it. The students, like adults, bet on a fight without regard to the suffering of the fighters. The longer the fight and the more pain inflicted on an opponent the better. At the same time the media coverage of the fight focuses on making it as sensational as possible to satisfy the viewers.

The more brutal and gory a fight the more an audience will want to watch it.

Inevitably Jerry, as the good little guy, wins over the bad big guy. The fight is his test of manhood, just as playing football was Lucas's way to prove himself in the film Lucas or standing up and fighting for himself was Clifford's way in My Bodyguard. The reward for passing the test is acceptance by one's peers. While Lucas received a football jacket, Jerry is helped out of a financial bind by his classmates, including Buddy. They give him money to help him return what he stole from the bookstore to try to pay for the fight to be stopped.

Three O'Clock High also has other things in common with several films about teenagers made in the 1980s. As in My Bodyguard, Jerry is challenged to face a new kid that is rumored to have a very violent past. Buddy looks a great deal like Linderman with a large build, long unkept hair, and wrinkled clothes. Both are loners and say very little. Jerry, like Clifford, tries to pay someone to be his bodyguard and in the end has to fight his opponent by himself.

The school is presented as a kind of prison and some

of the adults are shown in very negative ways as in Ferris Bueller's Day Off. Although Jerry tries to leave the school, the security guard won't let him. Then he has to deal with the Dean of Discipline, Voytek Dolinski, who is a caricature of a Nazi officer sitting in a dark office with a metal sculpture of a soldier on his desk, the head of a wild animal with its fangs showing over his door, and several books about Germany in his room including one entitled "Nazi War Crimes." In addition his secretary, Eva, looks like a female military officer often portrayed in films about World War II German prison camps.

Another English teacher, Miss Farmer, is at first presented as a young but conservative woman with glasses, hair pulled up in a bun, and wearing a high buttoned blouse. After an outrageous book report by Jerry she begins to shed her cold exterior and like the two female teachers in Hollywood High, Part II, shows her sexuality by kissing Jerry and giving him her home telephone number. While under real circumstances her actions would probably cause her dismissal, in this comedy they are just accepted as part of a teenage view of adults.

While Jerry steals money from the school store that he

manages, tries to help Buddy cheat on an exam, and lies to the principal, he is able to exonerate himself at the end when he fights Buddy and wins. Even the principal comes to his aid by protecting him from being immediately interrogated by the police detective investigating the robbery. The film thus side steps making stealing a moral issue. In this case the money was taken as a means to a good end which was to stop senseless violence. Since Jerry did not profit from the theft, he did no real wrong. Even his sister, who takes something from the bookstore, is never commented upon. Petty theft is shown as part of normal life.

As in other films, Jerry's parents are absent on a trip to Florida. There are no adults to turn to for help and the adults in the school serve only to keep him trapped in the situation. Only when Jerry goes to the roof of the school to think about his situation, is he able to get away and have time to view things in perspective. The flat roof surrounded by a ring of distant mountains visually communicates an arena. It is thus alone and outside of the school environment that Jerry must make a crucial decision as to whether to avoid the fight and look like a wimp or to

go ahead and face being physically hurt to prove that he can take it like a man. As with Lucas, Jerry must choose to fight in order to prove his worthiness as a male in American society.

The film communicates that male teenagers are taught in high school classes that violence is part of the normal process of growing up and of proving oneself worthy of being a sexual partner able to produce offspring who can survive and perpetuate the human race. Just as Lucas understood what he was taught about Darwin's idea of natural selection whereby a female chooses a mate from among the males, so Jerry realizes that he must prove himself in front of his peers. This idea is further supported by the importance of high school athletics in the teenage culture.

Some Kind of Wonderful

Some Kind of Wonderful, produced by John Hughes and directed by Howard Deutch in 1987, focuses mainly on the social interactions between students representing different social groups in a California high school. The academic side of learning is not seen as being very important. The main character, Keith, is an aspiring artist who does not

want to go to college. His friend, Watts, likes playing drums. She is not interested in studying and comes to school with no books. Only Keith's love interest, Amanda Jones, is seen with a teacher. The circumstances, however, have nothing to do with academics. The teenage high school world is thus presented as more concerned with informal learning from one's peers and with being socially acceptable.

Keith, an eighteen year old who works in a gas station and dreams of becoming a painter, is presented as a shy nice guy who does not fit in with other students at school and is inexperienced in dating. His attraction to Amanda, a popular girl who socializes with the rich and famous crowd at school, brings him face-to-face with social segregation at the high school level. As he tells his father, "In the eyes of most people around here I'm nothing. I'm one of those guys who don't fit in." As an artist, he is already being treated differently. The school thus reflects the opinions of the outside world that views artists as different from the more socially acceptable crowd.¹⁴

¹⁴Some Kind of Wonderful, 35 mm, 93 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987.

This is also true of Keith's best friend who happens to be a girl. Wanting to be a drummer, which is a profession normally occupied by men, she dresses in male attire. This only complicates matters socially. Her peers interpret her choice of clothing as meaning that she is a Lesbian. Like Keith, she does not fit the normal pattern and is excluded.

While Amanda Jones comes from the same middle class area as Keith and Watts, her looks help her break the social barrier. She attracts Hardy, a high school student who belongs to the popular rich crowd. As the film communicates, teenagers are very aware of the social differences between groups and often suffer because of it. As Amanda later confesses to Keith she feels ashamed and dislikes that she is from a less privileged class. Living in a materialistic society she hates watching her rich friends get whatever their heart's desire. While the high school may bring together people of various backgrounds and social classes, it is not an equal playing field. Teenagers, just like adults, tend to socialize with those who have similar interests and come from the same social class.

Hardy, as the rich, good looking, and obnoxious teenager follows the pattern portrayed in other teenage films. Coming from a background where money buys everything including popularity and power over a good looking teenage girl, he exemplifies the negative attitude that middle class people have about those who are more affluent. Even the rich girls are treated no better. They are shown as shallow snobs whose friendship is restricted to only members of their social class. As long as Amanda dates Hardy she is included. Once she goes with Keith, however, her token membership is terminated.

The only parents shown in the film are Keith's. Hardy's are out of town, Watts' are never home, and only Amanda's mother's voice is heard as she leaves with Keith telling her to say hello to Hardy. Teenagers are thus shown as spending a great deal of time without adult guidance and supervision.

While both of Keith's parents are presented, the focus is on his relationship with his father. Portrayed as a middle-aged middle class type, he dresses in casual clothes and is concerned about his son's future. Since he did not go to college himself, he wants Keith to be the first family

member to take advantage of the opportunity. Working with one's head, rather than with one's hands is considered an important social move forward. He tells Keith that he will be the first one in the family to come home and not have to wash his hands. Recognizing that money counts in this society, he hopes that his son will learn something that will help him make a good salary. A business program is what he has decided is the right area of study.

The film communicates that a parent can often steer a teenager into an academic area because of what a parent values. From the very beginning it is clear that Keith's father is the one most interested in his going to college. Looking over college brochures, visiting the high school counselor about programs he thinks are appropriate for his son, and following changes in interest rates on investments targeted for college are some of the ways he tries to direct his son's future. What he fails to do is communicate directly with his son about Keith's plans for the future.

The fact that a generation gap exists between children and their parents with regards to communication is clearly stated by Keith. When confronted about his future, he finally tells his dad what is important to him. While his

father responds with "I didn't know about this." Keith answers saying, "How could you know, you're my father." What the film presents is a teenage situation where given an understanding and loving father, communication is possible.¹⁵

Although Keith goes against his father's college plans by spending all his college savings to be socially acceptable by his high school peers, even for one day, he asks that his father respect his decision. While Keith's father tries to have some control over his son's life, he is not presented as uncaring. Upon learning that Keith has taken his college money out of the bank, he expresses concern saying "I want to know what's wrong. Are you in trouble?" Knowing that his father is trying to look out for him makes it easier for Keith to tell him that not only is the money not important to him but that using it for college is what his father wants and not his idea. Appealing to him to treat him as an adult he asks "When does my life belong to me?" Keith then asks for his father to trust him, "You have to go along with this because you believe in me. I

¹⁵Ibid.

know what I'm doing."¹⁶

The film makes a point that a supportive father is very important for a teenager. Having the respect and trust of such a person can help in developing one's sense of self-worth and being able to make wise decisions that will have an impact on one's future. While being an artist is not what Keith's father wants for him, his trust in his son leads the way for Keith to achieve happiness.

Taking Amanda on a date, Keith includes many of the items seen as socially important for the rich and powerful social group he wants to show up--a very expensive car, dinner at a fine restaurant, and a gift of diamond stud earrings. The only unusual place that he takes her to is to a museum which is his world--a place where what other people think about him doesn't matter. Using a painting that he has made of Amanda showing her in a doorway and looking out, he communicates to her that she is at a transition point in her life. Supporting what he tries to tell her verbally is the idea that she should not be ashamed of who she is and go along with people who really don't care about her. Keith

¹⁶Ibid.

thus assumes a father/friend role and in his way provides a learning perspective to help Amanda see what is really of value for her.

At the end of the film Amanda returns the diamond earrings to Keith. This symbolizes her moving away from valuing monetary things and being with someone just to be popular. As she says to Keith, "It's going to be good to stand alone." At the same time Keith also realizes that being popular and fitting in is not something that he cares about. Understanding that he is in love with Watts, who is someone who truly cares for him, becomes what is most valued. Good peer relationships are thus seen as needed for teenagers to have fulfilling lives. Finding someone that can be a good future mate is very important. This is something that cannot be taught in a classroom.¹⁷

Student Confidential

Student Confidential was produced, written and directed by Richard Harian in 1987. The film revolves around the interactions of a new school counselor and four bright but troubled teenagers at Midvale High. The school

¹⁷Ibid.

plays a key role in helping the students deal with the problems that are significantly affecting their lives. In turn the students provide the counselor with the help that he also so desperately needs but cannot obtain in the adult world.

The counselor, Michael Drake, is a human resources expert and self-made millionaire who leaves the business world to work with high school students. As described by the principal's secretary, he is like a walking machine analyzing everything; a block of ice with eyes. The fact that he seems not to have any feelings immediately communicates that he himself has problems. He later compares himself to one of the students who is so focused on being successful that he pulls away from human contact. One of the ideas that the film communicates is that relationships with people are important for a full rich life.

While Mr. Drake is shown as unfeeling on the outside, his attempts to help the students shows that he still has feelings which are buried deep inside. His role is crucial in communicating with the students. He is able to see through their facades and understand their needs.

Just as The Breakfast Club uses clothes and cars or absence of them to communicate the character of the students, so this film uses clothes and the students' home environment to communicate their situation and needs. Susan Bishop, a bright and beautiful young woman, lives surrounded by literature, paintings, and sculptures of women that suggest sensuousness. Lying naked in her bed and lightly covered with what appears to be a satin sheet, the image immediately conveys that she is at a stage where she is awakening to her feelings of sexuality.

Elaine Duvat is also preoccupied with sexuality and movies. The walls of her bedroom are covered with images of beautiful movie stars in provocative poses. She wears a bodysuit that outlines her figure as she leans back next to a picture of Marilyn Monroe and mimics her pose.

Joseph Williams is portrayed as a young black student who is conservatively dressed in a shirt, sweater vest, glasses, and bow tie. Everything in his room is immaculate and in its place. By his movements and attention to detail it is evident that he tries to control his environment. The kitchen outside his room shows that Joseph and his family are living in poverty. His mother, looking very tired, is

wearing a bathrobe. Joseph pays no attention to her. He has created his own world within the one in which he physically lives. To maintain the separation he has successfully cut off all communication by not responding to his mother.

Johnny Warshefsky's apartment is also in a poor section of town. It is filled with machine parts on the wall and around the room. The walls look dirty and the kitchen is in disorder. Johnny's father in unkept hair, white undershirt, and work pants immediately conveys a blue collar worker who is not doing very well. Johnny, while dressed cleanly, wears clothes similar to his father. It is obvious that Mr. Warshefsky is in control. Not only does he physically dominate the room, but he also verbally controls his son. He has decided that Johnny has to take accounting courses so that he can be a successful CPA like his uncle.

The four teenagers represent the problems that teens have in dealing with their needs. Susan, although beautiful and beginning to be sexually aware, is shunned by her peers after having an accident that leaves a scar on her face. She lives in her own romantic dream world. Elaine, having grown up with a mother who makes a pass at every man she

meets, thinks that using her physical attributes to get what she wants is the best way to succeed in life. Joseph decides to use his mental ability to get a ticket out of poverty. To do this he believes he has to isolate himself from whatever will distract him from his course and prefers spending time with a computer that he has control over, rather than with people like his mother who might become obstacles in his path. Johnny also knows what he wants but is unable to attain his desire to become a mechanical engineer because his father is against it. What his father sees as of value is money and refuses to listen to what his son wants.

Michael Drake is given the job of communicating with each of the students about their needs and coming up with an acceptable solution. Susan, in order to gain peer acceptance, is outwardly transformed by changing her hair and clothes. Her scar is creatively hidden and her new image is more in keeping with her emerging womanly body.

Being in some ways a great deal like Joseph, Mr. Drake understands his driving need for success and burying himself in work rather than taking the time to relate to people. Knowing that verbal communication by itself will not work in

getting across his advice to Joseph, Mr. Drake reaches over and grabs his hands in his. Touching thus becomes the nonverbal way that Mr. Drake tries to get across how important relationships are in one's life. While Joseph resists the message he is given, the impact of this form of communication is made clear when he later offers to help his mother by making dinner.

In the case of Johnny the only solution is to deal directly with the cause of the problem which is his father. Talking in language that he can understand, Mr. Drake, acts as an intergenerational interpreter. He becomes the advocate that some students need in communicating with their parents.

Elaine Duvat is the only student with whom Drake cannot deal with directly. As one of the smartest students who is academically doing poorly, appealing to reason gets him no place. A parallel is made with his wife, who like Elaine, uses her body to manipulate men. Unbuttoning her blouse, Elaine tries to force Mr. Drake to give in to her wishes of applying for a job in film and places her in a position of control. The film, however, does not deal with the consequences of her actions. She is interrupted by

Johnny's setting off the school's sprinkler system.

The only person who successfully communicates with Elaine is Susan. Sharing an experience in which men try to sexually use both of them, it is Susan's protests against being used in this way that makes Elaine realize that it is not in her best interests. The film communicates that in some cases the only effective learning is informal peer learning based on experience.

For Michael Drake, helping the students becomes his way of trying to bring about change that he feels is so needed in the school system. As he does this he is also faced with seeing himself as a very unhappy individual who has lost touch with others. The students who he helps come to his aid and prevent him from killing himself.

The ending presents a transformation in Michael Drake who is shown in his office dressed less formally in a plaid sports jacket and turtleneck. He no longer looks like his former uptight self. As Joseph comes in and holds his hands repeating an earlier scene together, Mr. Drake rightfully acknowledges that in this case it is the student who has control of the communication process. Having taught Joseph earlier the value that people can have in one's life, Mr.

Drake now promises to teach him how to make a lot of money which will be of great value in the adult world.

Michael Drake, by his own example of having a beautiful but unloving wife, also teaches the female students that some of the things that they desire are not necessarily what they should be striving for. Sometimes what one hopes and dreams for does not make one happy. Instead it is important to face reality and deal with the problems in one's life--especially those that are caused by one's self.

Hiding Out

Hiding Out was produced by Jeff Rothberg and directed by Bob Giraldi in 1987. While starting out as an adult film about a stockbroker, Andrew Morenski, who needs to find a safe haven from some mob hit men, the film moves to a suburban Delaware high school where he hides out as a teenager named Maxwell Hauser. He observes that he hated high school and as the film progresses various negative aspects of the high school experience begin to emerge. It is obvious that the school is so large that the school psychologist does not know all the students. To communicate

with the students the administration uses a loudspeaker system that gives the feeling that the school is like a prison with bells ringing and an authoritative voice loudly announcing specified time periods for different classes. It is a system where an individual can get lost. As Maxwell's cousin tells him, "You've left the outside world. You gotta reorient your thinking. Think repression, limits, humiliation, despair."¹⁸

The teachers in the school are shown to be obnoxious. The coach upon entering a room tells the boys there to sit up just to flex his authority. The biology teacher talks about sexual preferences and states that everyone has thought about homosexuality. While trying to encourage the students to be open on the subject by communicating and sharing information, his attitude is one of superiority. Dressed conservatively and talking as he does discourages any class discussion. Even the suggestion that the teenage boys have had homosexual feelings can be uncomfortable for boys at an age when their sexuality is becoming important and any suggestion of homosexuality can cause a great deal

¹⁸Hiding Out, 35 mm 98 min., De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, New York, New York, 1987.

of anxiety. The students' silence in the class when encouraged to speak communicates how difficult it is to bridge the generation gap and have a frank discussion on such a topic.

The teacher who is portrayed in the most negative way is the history teacher. Both her dress and hair depict an extremely conservative type with high necked blouse and hair pulled back. A large bronze statue of a falcon on her desk suggests that she is like a bird of prey ready to pounce on any student that she finds out of line. As a pro-Nixon supporter, she is shown to misrepresent historical facts. While the film makes fun of her, what she has to say is something that has serious educational implications. From her point of view anyone who speaks contrary to her ideas is an anarchist. What she communicates is that the only point of view allowed in the classroom is hers, "You're not old enough to know who did what. That is my job. . . . This is my classroom. I decide what are and are not facts." She thus represents the teacher who not only squelches free thought but also one that misrepresents the truth. In an educational system in a democratic society her teaching can be seen as the kind that works against the beliefs and

values that should be taught. As Maxwell questions her, "Is it your class or is it our class?" the point is made that a class should be for the benefit of the students.¹⁹

Maxwell, as an adult, can see the problems in the classroom and not be afraid to react against them having nothing to lose. For reasons which are never explained, Maxwell reveals that he wanted to become a teacher when he was in high school. While his cousin voices the attitude that many have towards teaching, "Why would someone want to work so hard and get paid so little?" Maxwell communicates that education is something of great value when he replies, "Money is not so important."²⁰

What Maxwell stands for is progressive education where the rights of the students are of primary importance. He criticizes the educational system for its repressive behavior towards its students and indicates that some major changes are needed. Among the things which he points out is that a great deal of class time is unproductive and that the major points can be taught in far less time. He also brings

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

up the idea that the grading process should be reversed with the students grading the teachers. What is communicated is that the educational system needs to be more responsive to the needs of the students and focus its attention on teaching, rather than on trying to control teenagers. It is important to note that while the teachers in the film are shown as obnoxious, the teaching profession is still considered to be extremely important. At the end of the film Marlowe chooses to go back to college and obtain a teaching degree. This further communicates the importance of the profession

For the students looking for someone to stand up against the tyranny in the school, Marlowe is seen as their champion. What the film seems to be saying is that in the teenage world, leadership is just as important as in the outside world. One who stands up for their rights, be it in a fight with another peer or in a classroom against the repression of a teacher, is to be supported. Choosing a class president is not a popularity contest but an important step in exercising one's voting rights. The film thus has Bryan, Maxwell's opposition in the race, expose the vote fraud by the history teacher which would have given him the

victory. What is communicated is that teenagers can make correct moral decisions and that adult interference is often to their detriment.

While the teachers are portrayed in a bad light, other adults fare better. Maxwell's aunt is hard working and seems to have a good relationship with her son. Maxwell's teenage girlfriend, Ryan, has a very down to earth father who gets along well with his daughter. Marlowe also has a grandmother who raised him after his parents were killed in a car accident and who is very loving. Having strong adult support can be seen as the reason why both Maxwell and Ryan are secure and able to survive in what otherwise might be a stifling school environment.

It is also important to note in this film that in the multiracial school environment at Topsail High School the black and white students are shown participating in things together. Although the black students move and talk according to their own subculture, there is no communication gap between the students. Maxwell is drafted to run for class president by a black student named Clinton who is a very capable and energetic organizer in the school. He and his black friends constantly interact with other white

students as the campaign progresses. Maxwell's cousin points out a black student who is his friend to further emphasize that racial barriers do not seem to exist at the school. In the end Maxwell is befriended by the black school janitor who sees beyond his facade and saves his life by tackling one of the mob hit men as he is about to shoot Maxwell.

Johnny Be Good

Johnny Be Good, produced by Adam Fields and directed by Bud Smith in 1988, follows the experiences of a high school football player who is being recruited by various colleges that will stop at nothing to obtain him. The film focuses on the corrupt adults who are interested in signing him up and Johnny's difficulty in making the right choice.

At the beginning of the film the high school coach calls upon God to help his team win. He then begins to manipulate their thinking to motivate them to fight the other team. What is clear is that winning has great value and the object of the game is not just to play well. Winning means being American. The linking of sex to football is also made clear as the coach spurs them on with

visions of what they can expect after the game. This is also used as a strategy during the game when the other team is distracted by having one of the cheerleaders remove her panties. The film communicates that high school football is a sport that teaches young men to be highly competitive. It is also a means to an end--being popular, physical pleasure, and monetary gain for those so inclined.

The high school coach is presented as unscrupulous and interested in Johnny as a ticket to his own monetary reward. He is not well liked by his team and will do whatever it takes to get what he wants. Helping to frame Johnny for rape in order to force him into accepting an offer to play football at a particular college, shows him to be a very bad teacher for high school students. He is not at all concerned about his football players getting a good education.

The various male college recruiters who want Johnny are also presented in very negative terms. They are filmed in such a way that they often look grotesque. The recruiters use women, booze, and money to lure likely candidates. A college education is not important to them and they don't bother to present it as a significant reason

for Johnny to choose their school.

Only one coach stands out as a good person who is also interested in education. Coach Sanders of the state university is portrayed as someone who cannot be bought by money and who refuses to recruit prospective players on the basis of such. As he tells Johnny, what he has to offer is a good education. He is presented as a strong, warm person with a realistic view of life. When he talks to Johnny he speaks to him like a father giving advice. Visually this is communicated by his coming around his desk and sitting next to Johnny. While telling him to be careful he looks down on him and talks in a very conversational tone giving the feeling that he is very interested in Johnny and his welfare. Even though Coach Sanders' advice is not followed, he is still willing to take Johnny back like a prodigal son, who later having made a mistake returns and asks for forgiveness. Rather than being negative about Johnny's actions, the Coach sees his return as an important step in Johnny's maturation process as he remarks that his decision to opt for an education shows character.

Johnny, unlike many teenagers in films about high school students, is shown as coming from a fairly large

family of five. His mother and grandfather are both warm and loving and they are not willing to make money at the expense of Johnny's best interests. Both they and his two younger siblings are more interested in Johnny's doing the right thing for his future. There is no communication gap between any of the family members. They all interact well together and try to tell Johnny what they see as the truth as directly as possible. As his mother tells him, playing football and winning games is not what should be valued. What is more important in life is a good education and one's family. Since there is no father around, the grandfather is used as a supportive role model to help Johnny face the truth about what his values should be.

The film also touches on the importance of peer relationships and how they can influence a high school student's behavior. Although not malicious, Johnny's best friend plays a role in Johnny's considering going to schools which his mother sees as football factories. Since his friend is not as good a player, the only way that he can obtain any benefits is by influencing Johnny's choice of a school. In the end he also becomes a victim and realizes that his friendship with Johnny is more important than

anything he can gain for himself.

The most important peer relationship is with Johnny's girlfriend Georgia. She is the one that tells him to be good and refuses to compromise her position. As a future wife, Georgia is also considered part of the family. The film thus shows two very strong women in his life who care about him and who want what is best for him.

Johnny Be Good communicates the importance of right values. Education is presented as far more valuable than money. In a world full of adults who try to corrupt teenagers for their own gain, having a warm loving family that one can communicate with and sound peer relationships are the best defenses. Informal education plays a key role in moral development and is very important in helping a teenager make the right transition into adulthood.

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure was produced by Scott Kroof, Michael S. Murphey, and Joel Soisson and directed by Stephen Herek in 1989. It follows the journey of two high school students who have to give an excellent history presentation or fail the class. Set in San Dimas,

California in 1988, the high school is presented as a very clean and wholesome environment. The two main characters are close friends who have a love of music and generally seem to be coasting through life enjoying themselves. They communicate in what seems to be a west coast teenage dialect. Their portrayal is similar to that of Spicoli in Fast Times at Ridgemont High in terms of problems with history, love of music, dialect, and happy outlook on life. Bill and Ted, however, are not shown as being high on drugs. Living life for them is a party. Education is just not seen as significant until it seriously affects their lives by threatening to split them apart.

The focus of the film is on a history class and their almost complete lack of any basic understanding of key historical figures. As presented, the teacher is a strong and seemingly fair individual who tries to get past their dialect and happy-go-lucky attitude and impress upon them that they have a responsibility to learn something if they want to pass his class. The film avoids the more stereotyped view of teachers as in Fast Times at Ridgemont High by presenting a fairly realistic portrait of a teacher as a normal human being.

The parents are also shown in more realistic terms than in other teenage films. Bill has a stepmother who is about his age. While it is difficult for him to call her mother, during the course of the film it is she who helps and supports him. Her role may be seen as a crucial one in breaking the communication gap between teenager and parent since she herself is only a little older than a teenager. Rather than Bill resenting her or her wanting to get rid of him, they maintain a level of mutual respect.

Ted has no mother and must struggle against his father who is upset that he is failing history. As a police officer, Ted's father is portrayed as very authoritarian and unable to communicate with his son. His actions are analyzed at the end of the film by Sigmund Freud who concludes that the key to his character is his need for discipline. This we are told comes from Ted's father's fear of failure causing him to transfer all his aggressions unto his son. Ted is the embodiment of all of his deepest anxieties about himself. When Ted is in danger of being kicked out of school because of failing history, his father feels he needs more discipline. His solution to Ted's educational problem is to send him off to military school

where another authoritarian figure can take control.

While Ted is not concerned about the fact that he is doing so poorly in school, he is deeply concerned about being sent away. Bill is his best friend and the only one with whom he communicates. In a sense, Bill is his family. The need for maintaining peer relationships is represented as of utmost importance. This is underscored by the plot which from the very beginning lets us know through a narrator that Bill and Ted must stay together so that some day they will create the music that will be the basis of a new society.

The film offers a fairly easy solution out of Bill and Ted's dilemma by having them travel to different places in time and bring key historical figures back who can express their opinions on modern San Dimas. Outside of a knowledge of dates and a few facts on some of the figures, there is no indication, however, that Bill and Ted gain any significant knowledge or insight into the past.

As a comedy the film tries to use the historic figures for comic effect by having them act like young children. Napoleon goes crazy for a water slide named Waterloo while Genghis Khan tries out the stock at a sports equipment

store. Socrates and Billy the Kid attempt to pick up two young women at the mall and Joan of Arc takes over an aerobics class. Only Abraham Lincoln and Sigmund Freud manage to maintain a fair amount of dignity.

Bill and Ted's report on the key historical figures is presented as a world tour stage show. Making history entertaining and packaging it in modern terms is thus shown as one way of communicating with a teenage audience. What the film touches on is the issue of how to communicate the impact that historical figures had on the course of history and its significance in the world as it is today.

As a teenage film, Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure stresses the importance of music in a teenager's life as a key part of their culture and communication system. While Bill and Ted pretend to play music at the beginning of the film, it is clear that they are not seriously committed to learning. After their history presentation there is a change in their attitude as Ted comments, "Maybe we should start learning how to play." The commitment to learning is presented as a crucial first step in preparing for their

future roles.²¹

Unlike the music of the present which separates teenage and adult cultures in its appeal, the music of Bill and Ted is seen as bringing all living things together. Its goal is to put an end to war and poverty, align the planets in harmony, and allow meaningful contact with all forms of life. The film thus communicates that what is valued by teenagers such as Bill and Ted are peace and harmonious coexistence in the world. When Bill and Ted make contact with the world of the future, which is viewed as an adult world, they share a love for the same music. Everyone communicates in the adolescent gestures and dialect used by Bill and Ted. In this ideal future world people are urged to be excellent to each other and party on. Being good to each other and enjoying life are thus the key values that the adolescent culture in the film hopes to pass on to the future.

The need for adult guidance is also seen to be important in helping keep adolescents like Bill and Ted from wasting their potential. Rufus, as the messenger from the

²¹Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, 35 mm, 90 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.

future, comes back to make sure that they finish their report so they can stay together and fulfill their potential. Mr. Ryan, the history teacher, insists that they learn something before they can pass his class. Ted's father gives his son an ultimatum if he is unable to do well in his formal school education. Even Bill's stepmother is needed to give them a helping hand to pass. The adult world is thus shown as basically supportive and essential in keeping teenagers on track so that they can make the transition into more productive roles.

How I Got into College

How I Got into College, produced by Michael Shamberg and directed by Savage Steve Holland in 1989, is a comedy about the high school senior experience of getting into a college. What is portrayed are the pressures college bound students face as they try to be accepted by a college. The importance placed on numbers rather than on individuals, is clearly communicated. Test scores, grade point average, and class rank are what colleges first look at in determining who they should admit. To point out that this is not always the best way of selecting the right candidates, one of the

admissions people is tricked into admitting a pig one year and another an elephant. The point made is that sometimes the best college material has more to do with the personality of a person rather than numbers on a page.

Both the recruiting colleges and the high school students must sell themselves. While there may be a counselor at the high school to help in the admissions process, the film shows that the majority of the work is undertaken outside the school--usually by the students themselves. For the students who can pay for it there are always the services of college prep tutors who promise to help those who have done poorly on the tests or need something extra to make the colleges notice them despite their shortcomings.

The film looks at the experiences of the white middle class students from a suburban high school and that of the poorer black students from the city of Detroit. While the white students are shown taking tests, getting help from college prep tutors, and attending college fairs, the black students wait to be recruited by excelling in something that colleges want like football or simply don't try to apply having already determined that their likelihood for

acceptance is not good.

There are three different types of white students presented. The main character is Marlon, a not too bright but likeably person who wants to go to college. His reasons for him doing so are not clearly stated, although a scene showing his father and young stepmother indicates that she is anxious for him to leave. While Marlon seems to have a good relationship with his parents, it is apparently not an extremely close one. Just as his father is starting a new life with a new wife, so Marlon is expected to begin to look elsewhere for his future. The answer for Marlon is to pursue the woman of his dreams, Jessica Kailo. Although he still does not have any particular academic areas of study in mind, he focuses on being admitted to a very good college to which Jessica wants to go. The film then follows his attempts at finding a way to be admitted despite his poor high school record.

Marlon's nightmares about taking the SAT exam, particularly in dealing with math problems, convey the mental torture that some students experience when taking the test. Although the nightmares are humorously handled, it is clear that some students have difficulty with problems in

math that also require verbal ability in reading the information accurately. The high school is not shown helping students like Marlon with preparing for the college entrance exams. Instead he and other students who are having difficulty end up paying a team of so called experts in finding ways to boost their chances of admittance.

In contrast to Marlon, Jessica Kailo is a beautiful, bright, and extremely popular student who has no difficulty with exams and seems extremely qualified to go to any college that she chooses. She is the overachiever type who combines academic excellence with extra curricular activities and study abroad to boost her chances of success. Although she appears very secure and confident, she is presented as unable to deal with the possibility of failure.

Oliver, Marlon's friend, is a third type of student shown in the film. He has no college aspirations. As he tells Marlon:

What's wrong with experiencing the real world?
Look, we get out of high school, stick our thumbs out, and pow we have a four year jump on everybody. We may even run amuck with rebel game show hostesses traveling the world with unclaimed

vacation prizes.²²

For students like him, there is no point in academics. Informal learning from life is more important. He has short term goals and no real sense of responsibility in preparing for the future. The film, being a comedy, fulfills his wish of running with game show hostesses, thereby bypassing any serious consequences for his choice.

Jessica's parents are shown as warm and supportive. Having come from a large family with her older sisters going to college, she is expected to follow in their footsteps. The only problem that Jessica encounters is with her father. He hopes that she will go to the same university that the rest of the family attended. While it is clear that she cannot communicate with him about why she has chosen another school, her mother acts as an important go between in supporting her choice.

In making the transition from the teenage to the adult world both Marlon and Jessica have to deal with the problems associated with college admission. Along the way they meet adults who can either help or hinder their aspirations.

²²How I Got into College, 35 mm, 89 min., Twentieth Century-Fox, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.

What is shown as crucial is the ability of the teenagers and adults to clearly communicate with each other. While some adults are caring and supportive other adults have no understanding or empathy for the students and their needs.

The college prep tutors are presented as corrupt adults who promise everything but deliver very little. Their focus is on how much money they can make rather than the best interests of the students. Most of the college recruiters and admissions people are also shown to be very biased in their selection process. At a college fair the visual depiction of some of the recruiters is purposely distorted to portray the adult world from a teenage perspective. It is also used to communicate the segregated world that some colleges foster by appealing to students of one particular subgroup. A robot recruiting students for Carnegie Mellon goes around saying, "Do you believe in robotics and artificial intelligence?" The robot is then followed by students who look like "geek" types complete with glasses, baseball caps, sweaters, and bow ties.²³

The recruiters and admissions people of Ramsy College,

²³Ibid.

the school selected by Jessica, are shown to include adults with whom the students can easily communicate. Kip is an easy going young recruiter who enjoys his work and is very sympathetic to Marlon. Nina, his colleague and girlfriend, is also very outgoing and sees beyond the numbers issues as she views potential students. While the other admissions people are more rigid in their views, Kip and Nina, being fairly young themselves, are presented as the ideal adults for students like Marlon to relate to. Kip takes the time to know Marlon and understands that what he will bring to the college environment is a personality that will enrich the otherwise overly homogeneous student body.

Kip's support is crucial to Marlon's success. Not only is he motivated to try for something that the other adults think impossible, but it also gives him a focus in his life. Knowing that academics is his weakness he turns to more creative ways of showing his willingness to learn new things and be a more well rounded person.

While Marlon is fortunate in being able to communicate with an adult, Jessica has trouble when she goes to her college interview. Placed in a situation where she sees herself as just like everybody else, instead of special as

she is in her own high school environment, her misunderstanding of what her interviewer is telling her leads to her inability to cope with what is a highly stressful situation. What becomes important for her is having a strong peer advocate to help her with the interview process. In this case it is Marlon who comes to her aid like a knight in shining armor.

How I Got into College shows how important peer interactions are in the lives of teenagers. It also stresses the need for good cross generational communication. Adults are in a position to make crucial decisions affecting students' lives. The need to see beyond the grades that students receive is important.

Say Anything

Say Anything, produced by Gracie Films and directed by Cameron Crowe in 1989, begins as a very light hearted look at first love as two teens prepare to graduate from high school. As in How I Got into College, there is a beautiful girl, Diane Court, who is also very smart, being pursued by a less academically inclined nice guy named Lloyd. Diane has also been very busy throughout her high school years

taking numerous subjects and is about to graduate without ever having had a social life at school. It is clear that her father has been a driving force helping her do what is necessary to get into the college of her choice. Cameron Crowe in his directorial debut stays clear of the heavy reliance on the sexual aspects of teenage life as was depicted in the film, Fast Times at Ridgemont High, adapted from his book by the same name. More emphasis is placed on the growing relationship between the two teenagers and Diane's moving away from her father's influence.

The only parents shown in the film are Diane's. While they both seem very warm and loving, Diane has a special relationship with her father. Her choosing to live with him after her parents' divorce is based on a sense of security. He is not only her father but in the absence of peer relationships also her best friend. She is not afraid to communicate whatever she wants to him because the basis for their continued trust in each other is the fact that she is free to "say anything" to him. Rather than lying about her growing fondness for Lloyd, she feels comfortable in telling her father the truth when she finally decides to sleep with Lloyd. The ability to communicate honestly is a very

positive force in building a sound relationship between a parent and child. Rather than wasting her energy in trying to revolt against her parent's wishes, Diane is content in fulfilling his dreams. Her life has direction and meaning. She will be going to a highly selective college.²⁴

Lloyd's parents are referred to but never seen. From a few comments in the film, it is obvious that Lloyd is happy being away from them and living with his sister and her young son. Lloyd does not want to be a career soldier like his father. He is an independent spirit who finds the idea of a normal job too limiting. Lloyd is also not academically inclined and does not wish to go to college. Although his career counselor tells him he has to decide on a career, he points out that he is yet unsure. Training to be a kick boxer, he understands that he will not know if this is what he should do until he has been in several professional fights and can judge if he is good enough.

Lloyd is presented as a warm, loving person who is also a caretaker. At the beginning of the film he is seen playing with his nephew. He is placed in a pseudo father

²⁴Say Anything, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.

role since his sister's husband has deserted her. When he attends a high school party his friends make him the key master--responsible for anyone who has had too much to drink and can't drive home. He also takes on a fatherly role with Diane after introducing her to the high school students that she was never able to meet socially while at school. To underscore this role, after Diane explains to Lloyd about choosing to live with her dad because she felt safer that way, the film has Lloyd lead her away from some broken glass on the sidewalk. Then when Diane's father is put in jail for stealing money from his nursing home patients, Lloyd begins taking her father's place. He has decided to devote his life taking care of her. This is even more visually represented in the last scene when they are both on the plane that is to take her overseas to attend college. Sitting next to her he carefully reassures her as the plane they are in takes off, thereby calming her fears about flying.

Say Anything stresses the importance of social interaction and peer learning for teenagers. While Diane has gone to high school and graduated as a top international scholar, the formal learning has not prepared her for what

she needs to be happy in life. Having good communication with one's peers is essential in the growing up process-- particularly in having a sound loving relationship.

Unlike many parents in teenage films, Diane's father is portrayed as not only very supportive of her education, having encouraged her to spend all her spare time taking courses in order to be a top scholar but also on the surface an ideal parent. There appears to be no generation gap in their "say anything" communication system. Unfortunately Mr. Court, like many adults, is shown to have been corrupted by money. Having stolen from his nursing home patients in order to provide for his daughter's needs and lied to his daughter about it, he no longer is a worthy father figure.

The film tries to communicate the transition taking place among teenagers from being dependent on their parents to becoming attached to someone of their own age. Diane thus is shown moving away from her father and towards Lloyd who will provide the love and security she desires. When she realizes she needs him and they hug, he stands under an American flag. Just as his father serves and protects his country as an army officer, so Lloyd will serve and protect Diane.

Heathers

Heathers, produced by Denise Di Nori and directed by Michael Lehman in 1989, portrays the teenage culture of the 1980s in a largely white affluent midwest high school. Westerburg High is a world onto itself. Within its walls lives a distinct teenage culture with its own language, customs and ways of dressing. The culture is further divided into subgroups and each in turn is depicted as having different values and beliefs. There is also a cross generational communication gap between students and the adults inside the school in the form of the teachers and principal and outside the school in the form of parents and a priest. All three major teenage themes are thus incorporated into the film: a distinct teenage culture, its unique communication system, and the cross generational communication problems between adults and teens.

While several students indicate that they want to go to a prestigious university upon graduating, little importance is given to formal learning in the classroom. The film concentrates on informal learning. The students want to belong to a peer group. They want to be liked. They thus are concerned with being popular. People who are

popular are seen as powerful. The irony is that while some of the students are powerful and seen as popular they are not necessarily the most likeable.

The female students in the school who are popular are those who know how to dress in coordinated fashions and who wield power. They are the "megabitches" who have little concern for the feelings of others. This elitist group has its own language and customs. Cheerleading and dating members of the football team are acceptable. Having anything to do with "geeks" or other types is not. Going to college fraternity parties and getting drunk are part of the normal routine.²⁵

The high school males who are popular belong to the football team. Their life revolves around drinking and dating. Their language and behavior abounds with references to sexuality. They are portrayed as less intelligent and limited by their high school accomplishments. When the football season is over and they graduate from high school, they will lose their power and no longer be important.

Those not in the powerful popular group include the

²⁵Heathers, 35 mm, 110 min., New World Pictures Entertainment Ltd., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.

leather clad motorcycle types, the poorly dressed "hop heads," ugly and awkward "geeks," those who wear glasses, and those who are overweight. They are seen as common and boring--something to be avoided and to make fun of. They are the outcasts of teenage society--a society that discriminates and categorizes people based on their external appearances and actions.

The teenage culture is presented as a microcosm of the adult society. It reflects many of the beliefs and values that adults have. Power and popularity are its guiding principles. As one of the main characters states, "Real life sucks the losers dry." What is important is to learn to fly with the eagles--to be part of the power elite.²⁶

The eagles of Westerburg High are three Heathers. They are good looking, well dressed, young, white women from affluent backgrounds. They each are fashion coordinated in their favorite colors--red, yellow and green. As the film begins they are shown seated in a garden surrounded by a white picket fence. They are thus set apart. Then as the scene progresses they play a game of crochet which is

²⁶Ibid.

associated with suburban affluence. The color of the balls they play with match their clothing. The most valued color is red. It is the color of the head of the Heathers, Heather Chandler. She wears red clothing and a red bow which is used throughout the film as a symbol of power. Her house is shown accented with red. Red is the color of the football team and of the sweater worn by the Yearbook editor. As power is passed from one person to another each in turn wears something red.

Associated with the powerful Heathers is another young woman named Veronica. Only her head is shown above ground while the other women play crochet. She is introduced as a new member of the group, but one who has not yet proven herself worthy of the honor. Her look is much darker and her colors throughout the film are blue and black. The blue color is a positive color, a sign of hope, while the black color is the darker side of her and her desire to stop the teenagers who abuse their power.

Veronica's goal in joining the Heathers' group is for popularity and not power. She does not like them. Rather she sees them as people she works with. As she states, "Our job is being popular." While she puts up with their rude

behavior, she does not agree with them. What she really thinks of the Heathers is expressed in what she writes in her diary. She is the most intelligent of the group and has the ability to forge other people's handwriting; an ability which others use.²⁷

The film also introduces a James Dean type character, Jason Dean, as a rebel without a cause. He is shown watching what is happening from a distance. His dark clothing and hair, along with Veronica's, identify them as a pair and in the course of the film they join forces. Jason is always shown in black and this makes him part of the negative side of Veronica.

Like James Dean in Rebel without a Cause, Jason is an only child forced to move from place to place during his childhood. He feels rootless and alone. Like Jim Starks, he wants to belong by finding someone he can relate to at his new school. He represents the teenager that does not quite fit in anywhere and must defend himself alone. As an 1980s character he can prove his manhood using a gun rather than by a "chickie run" or switchblade. He also represents

²⁷Ibid.

a potential modern psychopath who is charming and likeable on the outside but whose needs are not being met, making him a potential killer.

Westerburg High is a representation of American society from a teenage vantage point. The well heeled Heathers rely on superficial qualities to achieve power. Hard work and knowledge are downplayed in their very materialistic world. It is how you look and act and the group you belong to, rather than what you know, that makes you successful. The social aspects are thus more important than classroom learning. Students spend the majority of time dealing with problems concerning relationships. It is the central focus of their world.

The attitude towards adults as presented in the film is very negative. When the teaching faculty and principal are gathered after Heather Chandler's supposed suicide to discuss how the school will respond, there is a lack of concern expressed on the part of all but one teacher. Both the way the adults here speak and visually are shown makes them seem like they are gathered to conduct a business meeting of no importance. Furthermore, the one teacher who speaks out about their lack of sympathy, Ms. Fleming, is

looked at with disrespect by the other members, as well as by the students and parents. She is thought of as a flower child and a flake. She uses the suicide situation to foster her own position by inviting a news crew in to film what should be a private and serious healing session for the students in the school.

The parents are portrayed as nonexistent, divorced or detrimental to the well being of the teenagers. They offer no acceptable role models for the transition into the adult world. While Jason's father, Big Bob Dean, appears strong, it is quickly apparent that Jason does not have any real feelings for him. Big Bob Dean also has a dark side as a ruthless construction business owner who enjoys blowing up buildings. He talks to Jason as if Jason is the father and he is the son. This role reversal tells us immediately that there is something abnormal in Jason's world. Mr. Dean's lack of any real communication with his son undermines his quality of strength. Jason, without a nurturing mother and prematurely forced into assuming an adult role, is without any sound guidance of how to fit into the world around him.

The inability of fathers to understand their sons is further pointed out as the father of one of the dead

football players mimics an AAA testimonial at his funeral as he states, "My son's a homosexual and I love him." The fact that he really did not know his son, who was not gay, is thus underscored.²⁸

Veronica's parents, while being present and providing a stable home, are like cardboard figures with no depth or feeling. Her mother is more preoccupied with food, than understanding what her daughter is thinking. When Veronica tries to voice her teenage view that, "All we want is to be treated like human beings--not to be experimented on like guinea pigs or patronized like bunny rabbits.", her mother's response is, "Just how do you think adults act with other adults? You think it's just a game of doubles tennis?"²⁹

Along with Veronica's mother, her father is of no help. When he questions why he does things like read spy novels or smokes, Veronica tells him he does so because he is an idiot and he agrees with her. He has nothing constructive to say and there is an obvious lack of communication between father and daughter.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

The priest at the funeral of Heather Chandler is shot looking like he is towering over his congregation, presenting an authority figure separated from his people. His inability to communicate with teenagers is represented by his saying that Heather was not to be blamed for her suicide but rather society for telling "its youth that the answers can be found in the empty video games." He has no clue as to why the students in the film die and portrays what Jason Dean sees as the American society that "Nods its head at any horror the American teenager can think to bring upon itself."³⁰

During a dream sequence by Veronica the priest is shown as gullible and easily misled by Jason as to the true nature of what is happening to the teenagers. Reading meaning into the word Eskimo, that Jason underlined in Heather's book, Moby Dick, he tells the gathered teenage congregation that is all dressed in white, that the latest Heather victim's soul was in Antartica "freezing in the knowledge of the way fellow teenagers can be cruel. The way that parents can be unresponsive." He then ends with a

³⁰Ibid.

typical teenage expression, "Life sucks." He thus completely misunderstands what is happening and views things only from a surface perspective.³¹

The adult world is seen as exploiting what happens to the teenagers in the film and not doing anything constructive to help them. The most popular song is about teenage suicide, cashing in on what is viewed as a popular theme. At the same time the news coverage of the supposed suicides presents a false impression. As Veronica tells her parents, the news media is making suicide sound like its a cool thing to do. The television news programs are eating up suicide with a spoon. Adults thus have the impression that this is the time of troubled youth. The television coverages provide meaning and depth where none exists. The effect is to create a reality which teenagers begin to believe. The attempted suicide by an overweight and unpopular girl, Martha Dumptruck, is a result of how the adult world places importance on the subject.

The film itself is meant to be a kind of black comedy in which teenagers can fantasize about stopping the pain of

³¹Ibid.

peer pressure and discrimination that goes on. The audience is visually told this at the very beginning by having Veronica's head appearing out of the ground as the other Heathers play their crochet game in the garden. It is Veronica's wish to stop Heather Chandler that sets in motion the chain of events. Jason Dean is her facilitator, her dark side.

Jason prepares a poisoned drink to kill Heather Chandler using a blue liquid symbolizing Veronica and involving her by having her write a suicide note to cover up the murder. When Veronica is later humiliated by one of the football players, Jason arranges his demise. Since Jason has also been intimidated by the same player and his friend, who accused him of being gay, he decides to get even. He thus arranges not only their killing, but also having everyone believe that they were homosexuals--marking them socially as they had previously tried to mark him. Veronica is not only forced to write a suicide note again but also to kill one of the players. While she protests that she really believed they would not kill anyone, Jason replies that "You believed it because you wanted to believe it. Your true

feelings were too gross and icky for you to face."³²

The film maintains some moral balance by presenting the supposed suicide victims as abusive of others and, therefore, deserving of their fate. Veronica is the balance between the good and evil. While she is associated with the power group and assists in the killings, she is not all evil. Not only is she shown horrified by how two of the female students are treated in the school, but she eventually establishes contact with both of them. Her path to salvation is to win back her soul by wiping the slate clean, as stated by Jason. This means she has to stop Jason who has become all evil and representative of the use of violence to solve problems. When she faces him during the ending sequence she must risk her own life to save the school which he is about to bomb. Jason, like Plato in Rebel without a Cause, is the loner who has no meaningful place in society and therefore must be sacrificed for the ultimate good of the school. Ironically he is the only real suicide victim, blowing himself up so that Veronica and the school can be saved.

³²Ibid.

Veronica symbolically becomes the blue bird of happiness who brings peace and harmony into the school. As she takes Heather Chandler's red bow of power at the end of the film and places it on her head she reaches out to Martha Dumptruck, who was previously humiliated by Heather Chandler. The ending shot of Veronica and Martha talking together shows the potential of using power for the purpose of doing good. The film thus sends a message to teenagers that peer pressure can be bad and violence is not the way to deal with their problems. Breaking down the social barriers of peer segregation in high schools is important and can only be done by getting to know other students. Being popular is not something that should be valued. Meaningful relationships should include respecting and liking the other person.

The films about the white public school experience from 1986 to 1989 move away from juvenile delinquency and drugs and concentrate more on the importance of good peer relationships. If there is physical violence in a school it is between two students as in Three O'Clock High and Heathers or between two adults as in Hiding Out.

The only film that centers around a teacher, Summer

School, deals with a group of students who are basically good and with a little help and understanding can improve academically. Gone is the violent "garbage can" image of a white school. The teacher, Mr. Shoop, is a friend rather than a substitute father figure. His motivation for teaching the students has more to do with keeping his job, rather than a love for the profession as depicted in previous films.

Despite the decrease in violence, high schools continue to be presented as repressive and highly confining institutions. References to Nazi Germany are found in Three O'Clock High and the high school in Hiding Out is referred to as a place of humiliation and despair. Added to this are negative portrayals of teachers and administrators and a general student attitude that what one learns in school has little to do with one's life afterwards. The only films that put any stress on formal education are Summer School and Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure. In both cases the pressure to learn comes from a teacher and is limited to what they are teaching.

Male teachers and administrators continue to be the most important characters in the school systems portrayed;

the majority of whom are ridiculed. Mr. Rooney in Ferris Bueller's Day Off is the most memorable administrator out to get a student, followed by the football coach in Johnny Be Good. Female teachers do not fare much better. The English teacher in Three O'Clock High is portrayed as transformed into a seductress after a book report by her student, while a history teacher in Hiding Out is corrupt and narrow minded. Only two male teachers, the college coach in Johnny Be Good and the history teacher in Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, are shown as strong and competent individuals.

The majority of students are concerned about social relationships. Males seek to be seen as strong and powerful and belong to the popular peer group. Playing football and proving one's self physically are the accepted ways of being popular and attracting a mate. Being intelligent makes one an outcast like Lucas in Lucas and Richard Norvik in Peggy Sue Got Married. Ironically this is not true for women like Jessica in How I Got into College, Diane in Say Anything, and Veronica in Heathers. All three are top students academically. Diane is the only one that is not socially active during high school but upon graduation is quickly integrated into her peer group through her newly made

boyfriend. All three attract male caretakers who are not as academically inclined, but who are needed to help them cope with their problems.

While formal education is not stressed in the majority of films, going to college is something that begins to take on more importance. Female students are seen as more academically inclined and college oriented. Like football players portrayed in the early 1980s, Johnny in Johnny Be Good decides to go to college to get a good education rather than become a professional player.

Belonging to the right peer group continues to be a concern in the films of the late 1980s--particularly the popular one. Hierarchical social structures become an important part of the high school experience. Attractiveness for female students, and money and physical prowess for males, are the key ingredients for acceptance at the top. Each peer group has its own designated way of dressing, talking and behaving.

A growing number of films also begin to focus on the attempts of students to cross peer group lines. Lucas in Lucas tries to be one of the football players, Keith in Some Kind of Wonderful takes out the popular girl in school

trying to experience what it is like to be part of the school elite, and Veronica in Heathers reaches out to the outcasts. There is a move towards breaking down the artificial boundaries that separate students into in and out groups.

Cross generational communication between students and their parents continues to be a problem as parents are portrayed as absent, ridiculous and only concerned with themselves. At the same time some of the films do show loving relationships as in Johnny Be Good between Johnny and his mother and between Peggy Sue and her parents in Peggy Sue Got Married. More grandparents are also portrayed as loving and concerned with their grandchildren. Despite the positive portrayals, however, communication between adults and teenagers continues to be limited. Teenagers are generally portrayed as living and communicating in their own culture where informal learning, particularly about social relationships, dominates their lives.

The white experience of the 1980s continues the trend of the 1950s films depicting mainly the male, white, middle class, public high school experience. Informal learning is more important than formal. The more learning is made

informal, the more effective it becomes. Schools continue to be very repressive and students tend to view formal learning as having little value outside of the school setting. High school students are more interested in their own culture and peer learning. With little or no cross generational communication, students get the better of unresponsive adults, handle their own predicaments, and depend upon their peers.

Unlike the 1950s, the films of the 1980s present many situations as comedies that allow them to avoid dealing with serious issues. At the same time student-heroes begin to reveal more about themselves as they talk with their peers, directly to the audience as Ferris Bueller does, through diary entries as Veronica does in Heathers or through the use of fantasy in How I Got into College, thus creating more understanding of the teenage perspective. Ironically, at a time when the portrayal of sex and violence is less restricted, most "teenage education" films of the white experience become less graphic. While the issue of sex remains important, making friends and establishing sound healthy relationships become a major focus.

Although the majority of "teenage education" genre

films are about the white experience in the 1980s; a growing number of films about white schools begin to include black experiences. Three films also focus on predominantly black schools. While both white and black experiences have some things in common like the problem of cross generational communication, there are some important differences as the school settings change. Chapter 6 will focus on the black experience and how it is portrayed in predominantly white middle class schools and in poor black urban settings.

CHAPTER 6

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Blacks appear in a number of films about high schools throughout the 1980s as students, teachers and principals. Although the majority of films in which blacks appear are about predominately white public high schools and focus on the experience of whites, there are several films which also show the experiences of black students. Taps is the only private school experience that briefly includes a portrayal of a black cadet. Three films, Wildcats, The Principal and Lean on Me, deal with the black experience in predominantly poor black, urban high schools. How I Got into College starts out concerned with the experiences of students in a white suburban high school and then includes the experiences of two students from a poor urban black school.

Fame

In the 1980 film, Fame, two of the students attending New York City's High School of the Performing Arts, are

black. One is a male dancer, Leroy Johnson, and the other is a singer named Coco. Both come from a poor lower class environment.¹

Leroy is presented as a very talented dancer who is accidentally discovered by the school when he comes to help someone else audition. He is not prepared for the necessary academic requirements. Like many black teenagers from inner city schools, he has not learned to read well and is therefore locked into a world that offers few opportunities. This is communicated by a scene at night in an area where homeless men warm their hands standing around a trash can and sharing a bottle. As a police siren is heard in the distance, Leroy is shown nearby struggling to read a piece of paper.

While the high school is specifically geared towards creative students, it also has to teach academic subjects appropriate for high school. Students must pass the creative and academic requirements to graduate. As the English teacher, Mrs. Sherwood, tells Leroy, if he doesn't

¹Fame, 35 mm, 130 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., Santa Monica, Calif., 1980. (For a discussion of the plot of Fame see Chapter 4.)

learn to read he will not be allowed to graduate no matter how talented he is. Although stress is placed on academic skills, neither the school nor the teachers are shown as prepared to handle students like Leroy. Having come from an environment where academic learning is not seen as valuable and is usually discouraged, he is academically unprepared at the high school level. While Mrs. Sherwood understands that Leroy's insufficient reading skills will prevent him from enjoying literary works, Leroy also understands that reading well will take him one more step away from his friends.

Going to high school puts Leroy in a social bind. While the film shows him struggling to change and adapt to the school's requirements, he finds himself no longer belonging to the world that he comes from and not yet acceptable to the world in which he so desperately tries to find a place. As he says to his English teacher:

I stopped going home a long time ago, but you didn't know that did you? You people make a big deal about pulling ourselves outside of the gutter, but you still won't eat with us. You know where that leaves people like me? Nowhere.²

This underscores the need for providing for students

²Ibid.

like Leroy. The school gives him a direction and purpose and holds out the opportunity for a better life. What is lacking is a support system needed to give him the more individualized learning in areas where he is still weak. His white female English teacher is not sensitive to his situation, just as he is not to hers when he confronts her in a hospital awaiting news of her husband's condition. The generational and cultural communication gap is shown to be a problem that blacks like Leroy have to deal with in order to succeed.

The film also touches on interracial relationships by having Leroy be seduced by a beautiful white dancer. It is obvious from the portrayal that there is no love between them. When she gets pregnant, the problem is taken care of with an abortion without Leroy's knowledge. The issue of any serious consequences in having an interracial child and marriage are thus avoided.

The other black student, Coco, is shown as able to handle academics and work well within the school system. Being greatly motivated to become successful and move out of her poor environment, her focus on learning is to use her talent to make money. She continually tries to encourage

another music student, Bruno, to play "real" music that can be heard and appreciated by other people. Her friendship with Bruno has a very positive affect on his playing. After observing them together Bruno's father thanks her for making his son happy. The matter of race is never seen as important.

While confident and secure in peer relationships in the school, Coco is also shown to be very vulnerable in dealing with adults. The desire for fame that many students like Coco have places them in a position where they can easily be preyed upon by people outside the academic institution. The lively and talkative Coco is seen being taken in by the promise of a screen test. As the image of her is captured on video tape by a phony film producer, the visual communicates the exploitation of youth by the adult world. Alone, with no one to help her the image of Coco with bared breasts communicates the frightened child she still is.

What the film presents in terms of the black experience are two teenagers, who given the opportunity to learn in a creative field, are very strongly motivated. Just like other teenagers they are at the mercy of an adult

world that may not understand them and may exploit them. While the school is a good learning environment, it is limited in preparing them for the realities of the outside world.

One black teacher depicted in the film is shown as respected by the students and sensitive to their needs helping them get through the difficult audition process. His race is not presented as a factor in the racially mixed school environment. The black students focused on in the film are not in any of his classes and therefore he does not play any role in their lives.

What is missing in this film are the parents of the black students Leroy and Coco. Neither Leroy nor Coco ever mention their families, nor do they develop any communication with the teachers at the school. With no adult figures around to support and protect these students, life is far more difficult for them. They can only grow and develop based on the belief that they have in themselves. They are shown struggling alone with only peer relationships to help them.

The existence of a public institution like the New York School of the Performing Arts is positively portrayed.

It provides for the needs of creative students--particularly for poor students like Leroy and Coco who could never afford to pay for private teachers in their chosen fields. It thus can be seen as an important option for black students whose only way out of poverty is their creative ability. It also provides them with an opportunity to communicate with students of other races and economic levels. In this unique world they have a chance to thrive.

Taps

Taps is the only private school where a black student is presented. He is an officer who communicates well with his peers and is portrayed as belonging in the highly structured military school world. Very little insight is given into his character. He makes two references to food which leaves the impressions that this is his major preoccupation in contrast to the seriousness of the main action of the film. As the first casualty when the cadets at the school make a stand against the closing of the institution, the film says little about the black military

school experience.³

Fast Times at Ridgemont High

While Fast Times at Ridgemont High is concerned about the white high school experience in California, two black students are focused on briefly. One is the chief football player of the school and the other his brother and friend of the surfer Spicoli who is always shown as being high. The film depicts how both brothers are manipulated by Spicoli who looks on life as one big party. First, he has the football players's brother borrow his car which was given to him as a reward for his athletic ability. The car is used to have fun. When it is crashed by Spicoli, he finds a way for him and his friend to escape without taking responsibility for his actions. Painting the car to look as if the damage was done by the opposing football team, it becomes a positive factor in motivating the football player to win the game.⁴

³Taps, 35 mm, 118 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1981. (For a discussion of the plot of Taps see Chapter 8.)

⁴Fast Times at Ridgemont High, 35 mm, 92 min., Universal City Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1982. (For a discussion of the plot of Fast Times at Ridgemont High see

Within the film Spicoli's manipulation is shown as funny and without any negative racial intent. One interpretation, however, is that what is communicated is the manipulation of blacks by whites on a teenage level. At the same time, however, the black football player is presented as part of the upper social class at school. There are no racial barriers when it come to athletics. White students want to be associated with him because of his social standing. Since winning a football game is so important in teenage culture, whoever does so is treated like a hero. In this sense the portrayal of the black football player can be seen as a positive experience.

Class of 1984

Class of 1984, which depicts violence in an urban school, portrays both black and white students in gangs and fighting over territorial rights to pushing drugs within the high school. The film, however, downplays the violence of the black students by showing only one black student dealing drugs and one fight between the black and white gangs which is quickly interrupted by police. The rest of the film is

only concerned with the white gang's activity. Although not focused on the black experience, the film does communicate that in a racially mixed school, white, rather than black gangs may be the ones to be most feared.⁵

All the Right Moves

All the Right Moves shows the camaraderie between black and white football players going to a high school in a poor mining town. As a team, they have to work together and depend upon each other. While the team members are shown socializing at school and at team parties, no cross racial dating is presented. In a rather stereotypical way the film has the black players show the white ones how to dance better. The idea communicated is that black students are better at dancing than their white friends. Cultural differences are never really explored and the film mainly focuses on the white players.⁶

⁵Class of 1984, 35 mm, 93 min., United Film Distribution, Canada, 1982. (For a discussion of the plot of Class of 1984 see Chapter 4.)

⁶All the Right Moves, 35 mm, 91 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1983. (For a discussion of the plot of All the Right Moves see Chapter 4.)

The only black adult presented is the assistant coach who is shown to be open and sympathetic to the wishes of the coach to get a better job. He, however, is never presented with any power. The coach makes all the decisions. When the main white character, Stef, gets into trouble with the coach, his assistant coach never interferes or is appealed to for help.

While not stating it directly, the film implies that the black experience in such a high school is not the same as that of the whites. Even though the two groups are shown as poor, the absence of any interaction outside of those related to the school suggests that the students live in separate communities. The school is thus the only place for any racial intermingling.

Ampipe High School is presented as providing the black students with the opportunity to get to know and compete with poor white students on an equal basis as part of the football team. As the coach tells them before a game, they are all classified together as part of the same class and need to work together to win. What the school provides for all the student players, regardless of race, is the opportunity to go to college on a scholarship and escape

their poverty.

High School USA

High School USA presents a portrait of a very bright black student, Otto, who comes from a middle class environment. He is the best friend of the main white student character, Jay Jay. Unlike Jay Jay and the other students in the film, however, he is very hard working and serious about his future. His life centers around building a robot for NASA and space exploration. While other students are shown as incompetent and irresponsible in working in the school's auto shop class, Otto is shown as well organized and working diligently and independently on his robot project. Even out of school he continues to test and refine what it can do. Like Miller in Blackboard Jungle he has chosen a career where race will not matter and where mechanical ability is important.⁷

The problem with being smart is that students think that Otto is strange. This along with his very conservative attire sets him apart from the popular crowd at school.

⁷High School USA, 35 mm, 96 min., Doron Productions Ltd., Calif., 1983. (For a discussion of the plot of High School USA see Chapter 4.)

Having Jay Jay as a friend places him in a group of social outcasts. Unlike the other members of this group he is not made to look ridiculous. He has skills that are very valuable and which help his group finally have their victory. By helping Jay Jay fix his car to win a race with Beau, the leader of the popular group at school, he becomes the unsung hero. While it is Otto's skills that make the difference, Jay Jay receives the praise.

The film does not deal with the issue of race. Otto is set apart because of his mental ability. While Jay Jay pursues the girl he loves, Otto is shown pursuing his dream of building his robot. In order to help Jay Jay Otto has to sacrifice the one thing that means the most to him. Using a series of close up shots Otto is shown as a very sensitive human being talking to his robot before having to dismantle its parts and adapt them for Jay Jay's car. The film then downplays his sacrifice by having the robot reassembled at the end of the film.

Outside of his relationship with Jay Jay, little information is every presented about Otto. His parents are never seen although his room with models and photographs related to the space program and solar system are shown.

When he comes to the school dance at the end of the film, he is accompanied by his robot. He thus is presented as the genius type who has no cross gender social relationship and is tied to his work.

From an educational standpoint, Otto, like Miller in Blackboard Jungle, is an ideal student--hard working, self motivated and focused on learning. He works well with the students that he is friends with in his peer group. In an environment where race is not shown to be a factor, minority students like Otto are capable of excelling.

Valley Girl

Valley Girl, like many films depicting predominantly white high school students, presents a black student as part of the background of a scene. In this film, a black girl is approached by a white boy at a party in the San Fernando Valley. Although there is no follow up of what happens, the impression left is one of social acceptance in a particular context at the teenage level.⁸

⁸Valley Girl, 35 mm, 95 min., Atlantic Film Group Inc., Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, 1983. (For a discussion of the plot of Valley Girl see Chapter 4.)

Teachers

In the film, Teachers, Kennedy High is portrayed as a large city school whose security gates indicate it has problems. In the opening office scene, a black student is brought in who has just been stabbed. This communicates that one of the problems is violence. Since no information is given concerning the student nor why the stabbing occurred, the audience is left to speculate. As the film later communicates the problem in the school has more to do with students being allowed to graduate who can't adequately read and write.⁹

Black students are shown in all the classroom scenes, but the focus is more on what is happening to the white teachers, students and administrators. The only other violence committed is by a mentally unbalanced white student who bites a teacher's hand and steals his car. The black students in comparison are portrayed as nonviolent and cooperative. They go to class and do what they are expected to do.

⁹Teachers, 35 mm, 106 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1984. (For a discussion of the plot of Teachers see Chapter 4.)

The one black adult that is depicted is a middle-aged, conservatively dressed lawyer who works for the board of education. He looks and acts as someone trying to represent his client. His inability to win a lawsuit against the board of education has more to do with the personality of the teachers with whom he has to deal than his own ability.

Overall the film has little to say about the black experience. While the film indicates that the school is multiracial, race is not an issue. Both black and white students are treated equally by the teachers.

Wildcats

Wildcats, produced by Anthea Sylbert and directed by Michael Ritchie in 1986, portrays a Chicago inner city high school with a football team sorely in need of a coach. While the fenced in concrete exterior of Central High looks uninviting and the neighborhood is portrayed as mainly poor black, the inside of the school is clean and devoid of graffiti. The black Dobermans patrolling the halls when the security guards are not around give a sense that the school is not void of safety problems. The dogs, however, appear very briefly and are used for a comic effect more than to

make a serious comment.

Central's black principal, Ben Edwards, is warm and friendly with a good grasp on how to get what he wants for his school. His resourcefulness is represented by hiring a white woman to coach the male varsity football team. When she tries to back out of the position, he shows good insight into human nature telling her that he knows about her dream to coach a football team, that she will be a sissy if she backs down and no one else will hire her. Throughout the film, he is supportive of both the coach and the team. He lets the coach have a free reign to handle the situations as they come up staying behind the scenes when not needed but present to celebrate and cheer when appropriate.

When the coach of the opposing football team attempts to disqualify some of Central's players on scholastic grounds, Ben skillfully demonstrates his administrative aptitude. Using the fact that his school is poor and not likely to have the computers to check the students' grades, he puts off his opponent. Then when an appeal is made to his reputation as a man of principles who plays by the rules, Ben is able to make Prescott's coach leave because he is not playing by the rules and wearing a required school

badge. Thus, Ben illustrates that a person can accomplish a great deal from within the system by knowing the rules and when and how to enforce them. His winning smile is a show of strength. Unlike the characterizations of most principals he is portrayed as a down to earth human being who can control his predominantly black school without resorting to physical means. He is also able to maintain a good relationship with everyone in the school.

Central High is not portrayed as a school filled with violence or drugs. There is no gang activity present and the Hispanic and white populations seem to get along with the black students. Even the criminal and truant elements as portrayed by Bird (Levander Williams) are toned down. Bird is a likeable black teenager who steals from other thieves and has been discouraged from school by the absence of someone to help him succeed in the right direction. As a great football player on a losing team the pointlessness of playing has resulted in a lack of motivation to learn within the school environment. Despite his dropping out of the team it is clear that his interest in football, however, is still there as he watches the practice sessions.

Levander is portrayed as a good person. He shows

concern for the coach when she is placed in a dangerous situation inadvertently helping Levander and his friends in a burglary attempt. When challenged to accept the opportunity to play, he keeps his word. Since the game of football has value for him, it is used to motivate him and his teammates. It can be seen as one way of educating minorities and those who academically do not do well. Although not explicitly stated it is also seen as one way of opening up further educational opportunities. As the coach points out, college scouts are likely to offer scholarships to good football players.

The educational benefits of football include learning to play for the betterment of the group, rather than the individual. Poor players can succeed if properly trained. Most important of all the players learn to never be afraid and fight for what they want.

The position of the teacher/coach as a role model is extremely important. Molly McGraff is a woman who has known gender discrimination and who has failed in her marriage. She has always been afraid to do what she wants and when faced with difficulty has tended to quit. In the film she motivates her football team by overcoming obstacles. To

prove that she is as good as a man, she has to challenge her team to outrun her. Once she proves herself, she becomes the leader--the authority figure the team will follow and respect against all odds. This is a critical first step in the educational process. If the students will not follow the rules, then learning cannot take place. The coach thus represents the adult figure whom the students need in order to learn.

Molly, a person who understands the teenage subculture, can communicate on their level. She can speak in language which they understand. Her dress is informal and appropriate for working with the players. She chooses their kind of music to do exercises and moves with them. As a mother of a teenage daughter who dresses outrageously to get attention, Molly understands students' needs. She successfully crosses the generational gap and earns the respect of all the players.

When Molly is ready to quit the team so as not to lose her children in a custody battle, she finally confronts her worst fear and decides to go ahead despite the potential consequences because she realizes that what she does will affect the players' lives. While not directly making a

parallel statement about the female experience and the black experience in attaining what one wants, the film does show that what is important is having a dream and going after it no matter what situation one finds oneself in.

The football team is seen as a way of bringing back the school spirit. This is something that the principal believes is important. It is a motivating factor that pushes people forward to win despite the odds. Using the football team as the symbol for the school indirectly communicates that there are ways to motivate teenagers to learn if one can find something that in their culture is considered important. For black youth in particular the idea of success is often linked to athletic ability. No one cares about the color of your skin if you can lead your team to victory.

There is also a large overweight character in the film. He is the intelligent, but unattractive personality that often shows up in teenage films. While adding to the comedy by being made to play football and using his girth to help win, he also makes a comment about education by offering term papers for sale. This downplays the importance of learning traditional subjects in the high

school. Learning a subject is not as important as learning something that has more immediate impact on one's life--like playing a sport. For students caught in poverty, learning needs to be an active process with concrete results--like winning a game.

Overall the film, Wildcats, shows a very positive view of the black high school experience. The inner city school has a caring and strong black principal. The black students are all likeable and willing to do what is asked of them once they have someone whom they respect and can communicate with to teach them. There is no racial intolerance on the part of the administration, coach or students. This is a rare wholesome view of the black experience in a predominantly black school.

Hiding Out

Hiding Out presents another positive view of the black experience, but in a more multiracial high school environment. Although there is a difference between the way the black students dress, talk and move at Topsail High School, they seem to have no problem in communicating with the white students. Clinton is portrayed as a black student

leader who marshals his group to support a new student, Maxwell, for class president. As a very capable organizer, Clinton would make any candidate proud with the energy that he expends in selling his candidate to the student body by constantly using his black friends to interact with other white students as the campaign progresses. Not only does Clinton's support of a white candidate communicate that race is not seen as a dividing factor at the school, but Maxwell's cousin goes out of his way to point out that he also has a black friend.¹⁰

On the adult level, the black janitor also comes to Maxwell's aid. Shown as a down-to-earth, hardworking, and perceptive individual, he is able to communicate on a one-to-one basis with Maxwell when he discovers that Maxwell is also an adult. Their friendship is crucial because it is the janitor who notices when Maxwell's life is in danger. He tackles one of the mob hit men as he is about to kill Maxwell thereby helping to save his life.

Clinton portrays a black student who has both

¹⁰Hiding Out, 35 mm, 98 min., DeLaurentis Entertainment Group, New York, New York, 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Hiding Out see Chapter 5.)

leadership potential and organizing abilities. He is very hard working and dedicated to the task that he has set for himself. Like Miller who organized a group of black students to sing for a school program in Blackboard Jungle, so Clinton organizes his friends to support a school candidate that he chooses. In both films black students use their abilities to do good.

Hiding Out presents students and adults crossing racial lines and able to communicate with each other. In contrast to the white hit men out to get Maxwell and a corrupt white teacher who tries to fix the election for her chosen candidate, the black students and janitor represent positive forces. Black students and adults are thus depicted able to contribute a great deal to the high school environment.

Summer School

Summer School presents two black students who are forced to take an English class in the summer to pass a required basic English skills test. One student is a large heavy set male who looks like the normal stereotype of a not too bright student. When he tells the teacher that there

must have been some mistake and that he is sure he passed the test, the normal response would be not to believe him. Taking the key to the bathroom and not returning until it is time to take the test at the end of the film, is part of the comic plot. The twist from what is normally expected is that he does pass the test without any help indicating that he was probably right to begin with. While the film does not explore the problem of stereotyping students, this student is a reminder that it does exist.¹¹

The second black student presented is a very lively and talkative female, Denise, who has trouble learning to drive and is later diagnosed as dyslexic. She is portrayed as a warm and attractive teenager who is well liked by the other students. Not knowing about her reading problem she has slipped through the system and most likely would have never been able to pass the English test without the help that she eventually receives. There is no reason given why her problem has never been diagnosed before. Her desire to learn to drive and to get help for her problem portrays

¹¹Summer School, 35 mm, 95 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Summer School see Chapter 5.)

someone who has a very positive attitude and is willing to be reached.

Mr. Shoop, as the unwilling and unprepared summer school teacher, is portrayed as the type of person who is able to help his students because he can communicate with them. Establishing a more personal relationship with them by helping them with their more pressing out of school needs, he thus is able to bridge the generational gap and become someone that they can eventually trust. Only in this way does he find out that he has a dyslexic student.

There is no focus in the film on the race of the students. Each is portrayed as a unique individual with a certain set of problems that need to be addressed. All work together to help each other when it is necessary. Having good peer relationships is important and helps bond the students in the classroom together thus creating a more positive learning environment. The black teenage experience could be that of any other student.

The Principal

The Principal, produced by Thomas H. Brodek and directed by Christopher Cain, is like a 1987 version of

Blackboard Jungle with some of the violence of Class of 1984. Brandel High School is a poor urban school whose faculty, staff and students represent a lower class multiethnic mix of black, Hispanic and white along with an Asian maintenance person. It is the dumping ground for students expelled from other urban schools and is set in a poor black neighborhood where black men sit idly passing the time away. Within its darkly lit and graffiti embellished walls there is ongoing gang warfare as different groups vie for control. Drugs and violence are part of its everyday existence and those caught between the forces are in a constant state of fear. As a student points out, everyone there is garbage with no place else to go. It is a day to day world where survival is the key. Formal education has no value. People are there biding their time until they can leave.

In this blackboard jungle, the high school is controlled by a black gang whose leader, Victor Duncan, is involved in selling drugs to the students. He, like the white gang leader in Blackboard Jungle, has no redeeming qualities. Pitted against Victor Duncan is a newly appointed white principal, Rick Lattimore.

The school and Rick Lattimore are made for each other. The film begins by immediately establishing Rick as an unhappy blue collar type who spends part of his life drinking in bars. As his former wife later explains, he is a Peter Pan unable to communicate in the adult world. He has a position as a high school teacher based upon help from his father but shows no responsibility to either his students or wife. His riding a motorcycle, drinking coke mixed with chocolate, and swinging a baseball bat at the car of his former wife's new boyfriend help visually portray a man who has never grown up and does not conform to any stereotype of a teacher. His job choice is never explained and his actions indicate that his life has no meaning or direction.

The opening bar scene helps convey the sense of entrapment and depression that Rick feels. It, like most of the film, is darkly lit and the main character blends in with everyone else. Like a caged animal his only outlet is swearing and trying to hit back at what he perceives as the source of his pain.

Not much information is given about his teaching at Willoughby High School. The one short classroom scene

showing him sitting at his desk and watching the students through binoculars gives the feeling of detachment. It is clear that he is looking at one of the girls and his comments about another not wearing a bra indicate a playful and friendly attitude that is not appropriate for a male teacher in a classroom.

Rick remains seated in the next scene where he is told he is being made principal of Brandel High School. It is shot to make Rick look like a child being told what to do by an authority figure. As the other people in the room seem to tower over him, it is clear that Rick is being made an offer that he cannot refuse. Rick's reaction is one of swearing, indicating his vulgar and rebellious nature. The principal position is obviously not seen as a reward for any accomplishments on the part of Rick. Rather it is a punishment--a job that needs to be filled, but that no one wants. It is clear that educational and administrative qualifications are not necessary to be a principal at this school. This indicates that those who control the school system are not interested in the educational concerns of the school.

Brandel High School looks like an ordinary concrete

building with only a plain fence around it. There is no grass or any distinguishing features. The only sign of life is a chase of the members of a white gang by that of a black one. When the black gang's car crashes through the school fence, the violence of the streets is clearly shown as being part of the world of the school. This also indicates that there is no respect for property or life on the part of the students.

Rick is able to deal with the situation precisely because he is not a traditional principal type who has made his way up the educational ladder to an administrative position. He is a man of the streets himself, in dress and manner hardly distinguishable from the people around him. The depiction of Rick as an irresponsible, beer drinking, bat swinging teacher who communicates on the same level as the high school students, along with his lack of fear and his physical ability to handle a fight are the right qualifications for the job.

Brandel looks no better inside than it does from the outside. The halls are dark and poorly lit. The graffiti of the streets is everywhere. The principal's office is plain and the glass walls give no feeling of privacy. The

lack of response from the staff when Rick arrives and the informality of everyone gives the feeling that one is in a waiting room full of strangers. There is nothing seemingly happening and no show of any respect for the new principal. As soon becomes clear almost no one really cares about the school or the students. One sarcastic male teacher reminiscent of Blackboard Jungle has given up even the pretense of teaching by not bothering to show up in his classroom. An elderly white teacher talks about the students carrying knives while a black one is concerned about teaching all her students because of the difficulty of motivating even the best ones. The teachers' apathy in an environment where there is no respect for the school, themselves or education shows the demoralization in an educational system that greatly affects the black population. Within such an environment, African American students have no one to instill in them any values let alone make them feel that education is important.

The only example of a once successful student is represented by the black head of security, Jake, who in the good old days, when Brandel had a winning football team, was able to graduate, go to college and become part of a

professional football team before a knee injury ended his career. Now working at his alma mater, he has gone back to whatever it was that first propelled him out of its environment. He still feels pride in his school which is visually presented by his wearing a T-shirt with the school name on it. He is shown looking out the window as he talks to the new principal about his success, communicating that there is still hope for the future and the possibility that other students will find their way out of the stifling ghetto environment that surrounds them.

Jake, depicted as strong and articulate, is a realist who is able to see things as they are. He communicates easily with Rick from the very beginning asking him: "What's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?" and letting him know that he understands that Rick is probably waiting till something better comes along. He also is sympathetic towards the plight of the students as shown by his escorting one of the Hispanic students, who is afraid of Victor's gang, out of the school. He even feels for Victor Duncan because he knows that eventually he may be put into a position where he will have to face him and that he will then have to kill him or be killed. Jake is presented as a

man who has accepted his fate and is secure and reasonably happy with himself.¹²

Jake and Rick become an essential team. Rick cannot function in the school until he gets the students under control. Jake is necessary to protect his back as Rick begins to retake the territory claimed by Victor Duncan. A white man in a black world thus needs the black man to cooperate with him for the betterment of all. The fact that both men treat each other with respect is very important. There is no sign of any racial prejudice on the part of either one. They are presented as two human beings who eventually share a commitment to make Brandel a school where the students and teachers feel safe so that learning can take place.

Rick's approach to everyone in the school is essentially the same. He, as an outcast from the more affluent, outside white world and as a former teacher, can relate to their needs. He tries to communicate on their level, recognizing that he is the only person who can make a difference. With the students he has an open friendly

¹²The Principal, 35 mm, 110 min., Tri-Star Pictures Inc., Culver City, Calif., 1987.

attitude--willing to help in any way from giving remedial reading lessons to trying to establish some communication with Victor Duncan, using an informal approach by offering to talk with him while shooting some hoops. He thus is not afraid to deal with the students on their own cultural level. He recognizes the importance of peer acceptance and tries to reach the students as one of them. They are all caught in the same school world with no place to go.

Rick's message to the students in a school assembly is: "No more." He recognizes the value of discipline as a way of making it possible to control the disrupting elements so that teaching can take place. To do this he tells them that drugs, gambling, extortion, missing classes and gang intimidation will no more be tolerated in the school. At the same time he communicates that he is not going to give them any lectures on the value of education. He understands that in the black high school experience there is often no respect for either teachers or education. Few students go to school to learn academic subjects. They are there to socialize, meet friends, find sexual partners, extort money, sell drugs and in general have a place to hang out with

people of their own age.¹³

Rick's confrontation with Victor Duncan during the school assembly also establishes the importance of territorial rights in a teenage culture. Victor has made the school his and Rick is seen as the enemy challenging him for control. When Rick gets Victor's knife and breaks it, he symbolically communicates that he is the new leader.

To deal with a world that is out of control, Rick begins by securing help and enforcing the rules. Discipline is thus an important issue. Unlike the principal in Class of 1984 who sat in his office and watched television monitors, Rick is shown as actively involved. He cannot properly take care of the educational needs of the school until he provides a safe haven for those who want to learn.

While Rick does battle with the students, he also is faced with a faculty that no longer have any enthusiasm for teaching. To justify teaching only the cooperative students, they view the disruptive students as animals not worthy of being taught. Not only do the white teachers complain, but also a Hispanic and black one who says that

¹³Ibid.

the students show no respect.

The issue that is brought up is whether teachers should have to teach all the students. Since some of the students do not want to learn and purposely upset a classroom, thereby making it difficult for others, an easy solution would be to get rid of those who don't want to be in the classroom. For Rick, this is not an acceptable position for teaching in a democracy as he tells his teachers:

Come on you people, you can't pick and choose your students. You gotta take the students that the school gives you and teach them the best you can. You can't just teach the easy ones and throw the rest in the garbage. If your having trouble with a student then you come to me. If he won't come out of the classroom, I'll come and get him. Now look. Every student we leave in the hallways, every student we leave in the alley, every student we leave in the parking lot is a brick off the foundation of this school.¹⁴

What the film tries to communicate is that the school has a responsibility to teach all of its students.

Rick not only promises to become directly involved with disruptive students in the school, but also goes out of his way to reach a student who sells drugs for Victor by

¹⁴Ibid.

going to her home and offering her free tutoring. As a young black mother who has to support her son, Treena sees selling drugs at school as far more lucrative than the kind of jobs she would be offered outside. What Rick communicates to her is that she has a choice in dealing with her future if she is able to graduate. She no longer has to be dependent on Victor but can get a good job to meet her needs. In an environment where there are few job opportunities for blacks, the plight of an unwed mother trying to make it on her own is even more difficult. As Leroy understood in Fame, pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps sounds good but is very difficult.

Even after Rick is betrayed by Treena and beaten up by Victor and his gang, he continues to try and bridge the communication gap with his students. He sees the students as part of his life. If they quit, then a part of him also quits. Unlike other films where a principal is portrayed as having very little to do with the students' personal lives, this film communicates that in certain environments the principal must assume a strong leadership role as well as teaching responsibilities to make a difference. Since there are no parents seen taking an active part in their

children's learning, the school faces a social, as well as an educational burden.

The only black student who is treated sympathetically is Emile. His large frame would stereotype him as not too bright, but again in this film that stereotype is contradicted. He is able to read well, having been taught by his mother. He protects himself by hiding his ability, which would set him apart from the other members of Victor's gang. The fact that he has a mother who is interested in his education communicates that he is different from the other seemingly-parentless, black teenagers. This is further brought out when he decides to leave Victor Duncan's gang rather than kill one of the kids in the neighborhood and is unwilling to participate in a plan to rape a Hispanic teacher. His beating by the gang becomes the major motivating factor for Rick to regain the school territory. Just as Rick has called Emile a "wuss" (coward) for being afraid of Victor, so Emile now calls the principal a "wuss" expecting that like other white people Rick will desert the school, thereby making his sacrifice mean nothing. By attacking Rick's integrity as a man, Emile is able to cross the racial and generational gap between them and appeal to

him on a gender level.

What Rick finally realizes is that he cannot reach and change the black gang leader any more than Dadier could change the white gang leader in Blackboard Jungle. For students like Victor Duncan there is no way out. Education means nothing and the high school is just territory to be gained and a place to sell drugs. With no parents or other role models people like Victor are doomed.

The final confrontation scene is similar to that of Norris in Class of 1984 who has to fight Stegman in the school. Rick thus must face the evil force that is in his school and defeat it. Just as Dadier was able to convince some of the gang members not to help their leader, so Rick also appeals to a member of Victor's gang not to follow Victor's instructions. Unlike Norris, Rick receives student help at a crucial time and thus is able to make the fight between them on a more equal basis. Again using a fight scene to prove oneself worthy of respect, Rick beats up Victor and throws him out of the school. Rick thus publicly establishes himself as the leader in the school environment. This is proclaimed by a Hispanic student who proudly identifies Rick as the principal.

The Principal portrays the problems that black students face in trying to grow up in an environment of poverty and despair. It is a breeding ground for violence and the selling of drugs. Without parental guidance teenagers gravitate towards gangs where there is a feeling of power and security. As Emile states, when you are with someone like Victor you feel like you can be anything you want and do anything.

Some students, like Emile, can benefit from an environment conducive to learning and a father figure who will stand up to a Victor Duncan. Being in a gang does not necessarily mean that all members have no morality. Since Emile recognizes that some of what he is asked to do is wrong, there is hope that there are others like him.

For unwed mothers the problems of survival can also often lead away from an education even though this will only lessen the opportunities for obtaining any real good employment in the future. What the fate of their children will be is something that is symbolically presented when Rick is first confronted by Treena's young son holding a toy gun and pretending to shoot Rick. The film communicates that not taking advantage of the educational opportunities

of a high school will only continue the cycle of poverty and violence dooming the children of unwed mothers.

The film provides no understanding into the character of Victor Duncan. Like other white students who control their high schools, he is seen as evil and cannot be reached. He is another black statistic waiting to be recorded. The only person who can relate to him is Jake who sees him as a fellow human being who has taken a wrong turn.

As a former student who was able to achieve some degree of success, Jake is the example of a good black high school experience. Not being in an academic position, he can only support the one person who is capable of meeting the students' needs and the educational responsibility of the institution. He shows no bitterness towards the students and does not resent the presence of a white principal. Instead he is supportive of both Rick and the students, providing whatever help is asked of him. His positive experience in the past keeps alive the idea that other students may one day also follow his lead to try and make a better life for themselves.

Student Confidential

Student Confidential focuses on four bright students who are having personality difficulties and the attempts of a new counselor to help them. The one black student is Joseph Williams, a computer whiz, who determines that the only way for him to get ahead is to focus all his attention on his computer. Like Otto in High School USA, he is dressed very neatly in very conservative clothes and portrays the image of a bright student. Unlike Otto, he has no friends and tries to shut out the environment that he comes from. In doing so, he also shuts out his mother who works hard to take care of him. The separation is not only communicated by the fact that he does not speak to his mother, but also by the difference in how his room looks and the kitchen where his mother is seen. While Joseph's room is very clean with everything perfectly in place, the kitchen visually communicates that the apartment is located in a poor area.¹⁵

The film emphasizes the importance of environment and

¹⁵Student Confidential, 35 mm, 92 min., Troma, New York, New York, 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Student Confidential see Chapter 5).

how it can reflect and affect the person in it. By creating a positive looking space as Joseph does for himself, he can hide from the poverty around him while working toward the future that he wants. As Michael Clark, the school counselor, points out, separating oneself from others, however, is psychologically unhealthy. Success without personal relationships will only lead to unhappiness.

Joseph is portrayed as a fatherless teenager who needs a role model to help him. Michael Clark, having also focused on success, rather than being able to communicate with other people, becomes the ideal person to show him the importance of relating to others. Joseph is not only successful in establishing a better relationship with his mother, but also in turn helps Clark when he encounters difficulties in his life.

Coming to his aid when he is beaten up and then later when Clark tries to commit suicide, Joseph, like Otto, shows he is a very sensitive and caring human being. The fact that Clark is white has nothing to do with their relationship. As portrayed in the film, the high school provides Joseph with the help he needs by having a counselor available who understands and can communicate with him.

Johnny Be Good

Johnny Be Good shows the white central character, Johnny, being bombarded with college football recruiters who are interested in providing their schools with the best players. In the cut throat adult world of college football, only one coach stands out as interested in Johnny as a person, rather as an item to be bought and sold.¹⁶

Coach Sanders of the state university does not believe in buying players with money and offers Johnny a football scholarship which will provide him with a good education. He is portrayed as a strong, warm, trustworthy black man with a fatherly attitude who can relate to students like Johnny. In a second scene in his office, he is shown physically moving from behind his desk to sit closer and communicate more informally with Johnny. Rather than berating Johnny for not taking his advice before about the importance of choosing a school for its educational benefits, he accepts Johnny's decision to come to his school as a positive sign that he has made a more mature decision.

¹⁶Johnny Be Good, 35 mm, 86 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1988. (For a discussion of the plot of Johnny Be Good see Chapter 5.)

The film communicates that Sanders, a capable person, has no problem in cross generational communication. Race is not seen as an issue in this film. It is the individuals who are important and affect communication and learning.

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure

Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure portrays a black middle-aged history teacher who has a strong personality and is fully in control of his class. His speech and demeanor communicate that he is well educated. While repeating the teenage language that Bill and Ted use to describe key historical figures, he draws attention to the differences between the adult and teenage cultures.¹⁷

There is nothing which sets this teacher apart from any of the others based on race. What is communicated is that within the high school culture, good strong teachers are treated with respect and are viewed on an individual basis. There is no difference in experience based on race.

¹⁷Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, 35 mm, 90 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure see Chapter 5.)

Say Anything

Say Anything portrays the white experience in a middle class urban school that has a black principal. The principal looks and acts as a middle aged conservative administrator and except for his color would not be distinguishable from a white person. He only appears briefly at the beginning of the film and no information about his black experience is provided.¹⁸

How I Got into College

How I Got into College looks at both the white and black high school experience. It begins with the white middle class experience of two students who live in an affluent suburb of Detroit and then moves to a predominantly black high school in Detroit itself. There two students are focused on. Randy Paulson is a football player and Vera Cook is a student who just happens to be in the school library at the time Roney is being recruited by a

¹⁸Say Anything, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Say Anything see Chapter 5.)

predominantly white college in the east.¹⁹

Playing football is presented as a very important way for black teenagers to get into college. It is a racial, social class, and academic leveling field. There are no difficult restrictions placed on those who play well. Colleges, as shown in this film, do not care if one is black, poor or not very bright. It is the athletic ability of the football player that counts. Roney is in a position to select from colleges that would otherwise not be available to him.

The importance of football for black males is communicated. It is their passport to opportunity and tied to monetary gain. Playing well can mean college scholarships, stock options, and numerous other perks. This, however, can trap football players into going to schools where they are used by the school to make money, while being provided with a poor education, thus limiting their future in the event they are injured or do not make it into the professional ranks.

¹⁹How I Got into College 35 mm, 98 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of How I Got into College see Chapter 5.)

Roney is first portrayed as a not very talkative person, having those with him ask questions about what he can expect from the college recruiting him. This gives the impression that he is the stereotypical football player who is not very bright and interested in short term monetary gains. Later, however, he is presented as more interested in academics.

Once at college Roney changes his appearance to fit his more serious academic aspirations. Quoting from Plato and putting on a pair of glasses, he announces that while he enjoys football he realizes that academic studies are more important saying: "Football is a great game, but its only a game. I think it was Plato who said it best when he said the unexamined life is not worth living." Just as white football players in other films during the 1980s use football as a means to get a good education and hopefully lead to a better life, so does Roney. For poor male high school students of any color, football is an important way to get a paid college education.²⁰

In contrast to Roney, another black student at the

²⁰Ibid.

same high school, Vera Cook, is portrayed as an outspoken feisty and hard working student who is limited by the educational limitations at an inner city school. Although she has aspirations of bettering herself, she is, in the words of the college recruiter, somebody nobody wants. Her life after high school graduation is foreseen as having to work at a fast food restaurant and then going to school at night at a community college.

The difficulty encountered by some black female teenagers is thus presented. While Vera has a positive attitude towards education, it is tempered by a parental view of life that believes setting very high goals is not good because if they can't be reached the person will only be more disappointed and hurt. Vera's mother thus has a great deal of influence on her life and tries to be supportive. At the same time, her own fears and experiences can be seen as limiting the potential of her daughter. In a scene where she first meets the college recruiter, she tells her "I never want to tell my kids they can't do something, because that's not good. It just deflates their aspirations." As she is saying this, her younger daughter is playing on a children's ride in the background and Mrs.

Cook calls to her not to ride on it the way that she is doing. The film thus visually and verbally shows her saying that she doesn't want to stop her children from doing something; however, at the same time showing she can't help trying to protect them and thus inadvertently sending them an opposite message.²¹

Vera's mother is portrayed as a warm nurturing person. With no mention of a father, she is presented as a single parent bringing up two daughters. Her experiences in life have provided her with a view of what is possible and this she communicates to her daughter as she says:

I'm sorry Vera, but I can't sit here and listen to somebody tempt you with offers she can't deliver. I'm looking for more than a fair shake for Vera. I'm looking for her to have a real career. Now first get the job. Then go to college at night if you want to. That's the way to do it.²²

The difficulties that the college recruiter has in convincing her school to accept Vera only underscores Mrs. Cook's views. In a system where test numbers count, students like Vera who don't test well have little chance of survival in the college selection process. What makes a

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

difference in her case is a female advocate. The college recruiter is sensitive to minority needs and as a woman herself is better able on a personal level to communicate with Vera and her mother. Although the film has a happy ending with Vera being accepted, it is not an outcome that is likely for other teenagers like Vera who don't have as strong an advocate to fight for their admittance.

Roney and Vera represent poor black youth struggling for the same opportunity as more affluent white students to go to a good academic college. While black males can use football as a way to get a scholarship, women cannot. Racial and gender inequality thus are important aspects of life that black teenagers must deal with to succeed.

Lean on Me

Lean on Me, produced by Norman Twain and directed by John G. Avildsen in 1989, attempts to answer the question of how to academically improve high school education. In particular, it looks at the basically urban ghetto high school which is overwhelming populated by black students, with a small group of Hispanics and poor whites. While based on the story of a real black principal, the film must

be viewed on its own terms. Its director, John G. Avildsen, is known for his interest in making films about man's ability to triumph against all odds. Both of his films, Rocky and Karate Kid, made earlier, are concerned with winning through hard work. Karate Kid also developed a father-son relationship between the Karate teacher and the young boy student. Only through their combined efforts was success possible. In Lean on Me the main character is the high school principal, Joe Clark, who becomes a father figure to his students to help them succeed.

The film begins with a wide view of the outside of Eastside High School in 1967. The school is surrounded by open space and bathed in warm light. The school song is heard on the sound track taking the audience back into the past. In contrast to the openness of the first shot and the slowness of the music, Joe Clark's classroom is like a beehive of activity. Well dressed middle class white girls and boys compete in an academic contest about civil rights. As daylight streams through the plant filled windows, the excited faces of students and teacher can be seen. The bulletin board is full of articles and pictures with a large peace sign of the time. The teacher, Joe Clark, is shown as

a black man who displays pride in his African ancestorship by wearing a dashiki. His commitment to civil rights is highlighted by his asking the students to identify the origins of American civil rights. He is intelligent and articulate displaying a strong command of the English language as he defines the word imbrue: "to taint, to stain. The cancer of racism imbrues our national character." Clark's dialogue also gives us the sense of a man with religious convictions as he continues defining imbrue by saying that it: "stains the spirit, taints the soul."²³

In contrast to Clark is another black man, Frank Napier. He is dressed conservatively in shirt and tie. As the two men proceed to a union meeting that has begun without them, the religious undertones of the film begin to emerge. Clark refers to the union members as Judases who will sell him out of a union started by him and Frank. He puts himself in the role of Christ saying: "They're not going to crucify me. I got the hammer and the nails. I'm not going to be anybody's martyr." When he confronts the members asking them to stick with him and have a more

²³Lean on Me, 35 mm, 104 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1989.

effective voice in the education system, he realizes all his preaching has fallen on deaf ears. The education system and its gatekeepers are not about to make any changes. He is the sacrificial lamb sold to another school for the price of the other teachers' salary increments. In a symbolic show of the corruption of the education system by control of money, Clark presses a dollar bill on the forehead of one of the union members saying: "God bless you man. Pay your bills." Exiting the school, he prophesies that they will get what they deserve reminiscent of the angry Moses who seeing the actions of his people, broke the tablets of the ten commandments.²⁴

As the film projects the story forward in time to 1987, the visual and auditory elements combine to show how the school changes. Police sirens are heard as the lighting gets darker. The bright, clean, quiet halls are now covered with dirt and graffiti and filled with students. Boys are seen fighting as the music blasts out "Welcome to the jungle." A thin white teacher is pinned to the wall by some young black men, while a Hispanic girl has her blouse torn

²⁴Ibid.

off by several black girls. Some boys break a bathroom window and a student lets in a drug dealer, openly dealing in the school as a gun is sold. When a white teacher tries to stop a fight between a black and white student in the cafeteria, he is mercilessly beaten as the students watch.²⁵

What the film portrays is a high school in complete anarchy. It is a jungle only fit for animals. The law of survival is the only one that exists. It is a dangerous place for everyone, but particularly for nonblacks. It is an artistically exaggerated picture of reality, but one which dramatically supports the ideas that many people have about what it's like to be in a black ghetto school. It is a world that has turned its back on the teachings of Christ, a world that idolizes the dollar.

As the scene ends, Sams, a young black boy who has purchased crack in the cafeteria, is locked into a locker. He cries for help and two girls go running for assistance. To visually and auditorially make a point, the camera begins to move back away from the locker. Sams continues to plead: "Let me out. I can't breathe." As the locker visually

²⁵Ibid.

recedes into the distance, a janitor walks by oblivious to Sams' cries. Sams, the voice of his people, is crying out for salvation. Within the school environment he is being suffocated. Locked in spiritually with no way to escape, he is the lamb who has lost his way waiting for the shepherd (Christ) to find him.²⁶

The place of politics in educational decisions is clarified in the Mayor's office. Frank, who is now the Superintendent of Schools, must obtain the approval of the mayor to appoint a new principal to Eastside High. As he reminds the mayor, those presently in charge of the school which is ranked lowest in the state, were appointed by the mayor. The principal position under the circumstances is such a politically sensitive one that it can only be given to: "someone who has nothing to lose."²⁷

The fate of gifted teachers who oppose the system is portrayed by showing Mr. Clark who is now conservatively dressed, emerging from an elementary school. His energies are bound up with a white teacher's concerns of finding a

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

room for a baking class and getting rid of gum under the desks. As Frank tries to persuade him to take the principal position at Eastside High, he points out that Clark has become: "an insignificant man" whose life makes no difference. "It's like you've never been born."²⁸

Frank, in a sense, is portrayed as the voice of God. He calls upon Clark as the Christ figure to go to earth (Eastside High School) and save the people (students). Portrayed as a strong, decisive, rational, insightful man, Frank has learned to work within the system. The film thus communicates that to facilitate change rational men in positions of power are necessary. All the Joe Clark's in the world cannot get the job done until they temper their idealism and emotional outbursts and play within acceptable guidelines.

Joe dresses the part of an administrator as he enters the halls of his former school. Immaculate in his white three piece suit he visually symbolizes the coming of light into the world of darkness. Sunlight pours in behind him and the background music is like that played on an old music

²⁸Ibid.

box offering a hint of nostalgia.

It is soon apparent that Clark in the role of administrator is an egocentric authoritarian figure as he tells the staff and teachers that: "No one talks in my meeting. No one." Reducing those present to the role of students he orders them to: "Take out your pencils and write." He demands the names of all the troublemakers, pushing aside any welcoming pleasantries or attempts to communicate with him. The film establishes two different sides of Clark depending on the role he is playing. In the position of principal dealing with teachers and staff he is portrayed as a cold tyrant. On the other hand when he deals with the students, he plays a teacher role which, while strong, is also warm and sensitive to their needs.²⁹

Clark's first concern is cleaning up the school by removing those who contaminate it by causing trouble, as well as by making the school structure look better. He asks the school custodian to scrub off the graffiti and tear down the cages in the cafeteria saying: "If you treat them like animals that's exactly how they'll behave." Clark thus

²⁹Ibid.

communicates his belief that environment is important and has an impact on the students' behavior.³⁰

The second concern voiced is that of the need for discipline as a prerequisite for learning. He tells the teachers that they must reclaim the halls because: "This is an institution of learning. If you can't control how can you teach? Discipline is not the enemy of enthusiasm."³¹

Clark is able to justify all his actions on the grounds that the school is in a state of emergency. In an institution that is aimed at teaching the principles of democracy, Clark proclaims that there is no democracy. He is the boss and his word is law. It is a case where the means are seen as justifying the end. The enormity of his task and justification for his suspension of democratic methods is visually communicated in the first auditorium scene. There is shouting, smoking and chaos. Students called on stage are bathed in red light setting them off from the rest of the students. Clark then dismisses them by telling them they are: "expurgated." His choice of this

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

word is deliberate. Just as he must clean the school structure to cleanse the environment, he must also remove the troublemakers who are contaminating the school spirit. He, as a Christ figure, can thus be seen as doing what is necessary to save the body and soul of the school and its students.³²

The use of the word "expurgated" sets Clark off as a highly educated man--someone who deserves respect. It also communicates that he is assuming the role of preacher and politician. Clark is making use of black culture's oral tradition which uses words to denote status and power. The possession of Nommo, the magical power of the word, is rooted in African culture. He who has Nommo is the master of all things.

Nommo is so powerful and respected in the black community that only those who are skillful users of the word become leaders. One of the main qualifications of leaders of black people is that they must be able to articulate the needs of the people in a most eloquent way.³³

³²Ibid.

³³Shirley Weber, "The Need to be: the Socio-Cultural Significance of Black Language." in Intercultural Communication: A Reader, 7th ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994, p. 221.

Thus the positions of preacher and politician are not incompatible. Being a spiritual leader requires some of the same skills that political leaders need--the ability to communicate and inspire the people through words.

To reach the black students Clark speaks directly to them using language and ideas with which they can easily identify. His words also carry religious overtones as he refers to the students as spirits rising from the dead and leading a resurrection:

They said this school was dead, like the cemetery it's built on. We call our Eastside teams ghosts. But what are ghosts? Ghosts are spirits that rise from the dead. I want you to be my ghosts. You are going to lead our resurrection by defying the expectations that all of us are doomed to failure. My motto is if you do not succeed in life I don't want you to blame your parents. I don't want you to blame the white man. I want you to blame yourselves. The responsibility is yours.³⁴

Clark goes on to explain that basic skills are necessary if students are to be able to achieve the goal of realizing the American dream that they see on television. What they are expected to do in school is learn--to work for what they want. "Otherwise," he tells them: "you waste time and fall into the trap of crime, drugs and death."

³⁴Lean on Me.

Education then is seen as something of value as a means to an end. Education is valuable because it leads to opportunity to get a good job. Getting a good job is valuable because it gives one the ability to satisfy materialistic cravings. Thus Clark leads the students from a spiritual to a material resurrection instilling the belief that education is the way to the promised land of America.³⁵

Clark continues in his preacher/politician role at the meeting between him and the parents. The spokesperson for the parents opposing Joe is Mrs. Barrett. She is portrayed as a hard and angry woman who, like many parents before her, refuses to believe that her son has been dismissed for a good reason. As she sees it, the students are bad because: "They just discouraged about what chances they have out there, what kind of jobs they got waiting out there." Responsibility is thus shifted to society. If the environment doesn't offer opportunity, then what's the sense of getting an education."³⁶

Clark, as principal, knows that to accomplish his

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

goals to turn Eastside around he must have support from the parents, as well as the students. To this end he addresses his audience and justifies his actions as based on directions from God. Clark also directly involves the audience. Thus the audience is motivated not only to listen to what he says, but also verbally respond making the sender and receiver one. This interplay is called "call and response." As the audience responds to his speech, a sense of community is created. This is essential in black culture which is still rooted in the "African world view which holds that all elements and forces as interrelated and indistinguishable because they work together to accomplish a common goal."³⁷

As with the students, Clark speaks to the parents in language that they can understand. His persuasion is based on emotional appeals starting with a proverb that they all can relate to in order to justify his dismissal of some of the students:

³⁷Shirley Weber, "The Need to Be: The Socio-Cultural Significance of Black Language," in Intercultural Communication: A Reader, 7th ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994, p. 222.

They say one bad apple spoils the bunch. What about 300 rotten to the core. This is a war-- a war to save 2,700 others. If you want to help us fine. Sit with kids and make them study. . . . Give our children some pride. When Dr. Napier came to me offering this job I saw the lightning flash. I heard the thunder roll. . . . I fell down on my knees and I cried My God why has thou forsaken me. And the Lord said you're no damn good unless you take this opportunity and do whatever you have to to transform and transmogrify this school into a special place where the hearts and souls and minds of the young can rise. Where they can grow tall and blossom out from under the shadows of the past. Where the minds of the young are set free. And I gave my word to God and that's why I threw those bastards out.³⁸

The character of Sams has already been introduced as a boy who uses crack, as well as, a victim of his own environment locked in just as he was earlier locked into his locker. Clark takes him to the roof of the school, away from the streets and into a kind of visual heaven. To Sams' pleas to be let back into the school Clark replies: "Trouble with teenagers is you don't know nothing, but think you're smarter than people who've already been down the road you're traveling." The verbiage used is direct and to the point. Clark tells Sams to jump off the roof explaining that using crack is just another way of killing himself, just slower.

³⁸Lean on Me.

Framed against the sky with Clark positioned so that he towers over Sams, the impression is of a father/Christ figure talking to his prodigal son. Since Sams has no father, Clark becomes his surrogate father.³⁹

Unlike the portrayal of many white principals, Clark does not stay in the background and confine himself to his office. Instead, like Rick in The Principal, he becomes highly involved in what is happening in the school and is in constant contact with the students. This places him in a position to directly communicate with them and thus to get to know the students on a personal basis. When a girl student asks why she can't take auto shop instead of home economics, she is surprised at his quick support. Citing the amount of money that auto mechanics make, Clark bypasses the traditional accepted roles for women in favor of realistic and pragmatic possibilities.

A short encounter with a well dressed Hispanic student named Kid Ray elicits the comment that he is wearing a nice suit like Clark, because just like him he has to look the part. The fact that he dresses well is important to Clark,

³⁹Ibid.

who shortly after begins to use Sams as an example of how not to dress saying: "show some dignity. . . . Self respect permeates every aspect of your lives. If you don't have it for yourself, you're not going to get it anywhere."⁴⁰

Along with looking well, Clark is obsessed with the students singing the school song. When he asks the students in the cafeteria to sing he orders: "No one can move during the singing of the school song." Even the picking up of a piece of paper by Mr. Darnell is seen as a grievous breach of orders as he tells him to report to his office.⁴¹

Clark's preoccupation with everyone learning the school song is in sharp contrast to the singing teacher, Mrs. Elliott, trying to get her students to sing a selection from Mozart. Clark is interested in raising the school's spirit by giving it a voice through a school song--using education for practical learning. Mrs. Elliott on the other hand is teaching something that has no practical value for Clark.

Mr. Darnell's confrontation with Clark in his office

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

is one that is more evenly matched. Both are concerned with their male image and the problem of respect. Clark justifies his actions by saying: "You contradicted me in front of my students." Darnel replies: "You give me the god damn respect you damn well want yourself or I will kick your black ass." There is no longer a principal vs. teacher position, but rather a black male versus a black male one. The shot shows each man on either side of Clark's desk. As Darnell overturns the desk to emphasize his frustration, the visual image also conveys the idea of how Clark's actions are affecting the world of the teachers around him.⁴² Everyone has been thrown off balance. This is again punctuated by Ms. Levias' statement about the chaos that he is causing which no one seems to understand. To this, Clark's comment: "That's exactly the way I like it," only emphasizes the stubbornness of the character. It is ironic, however, that at this point in the film Clark is forced to get down on his hands and knees in order to pick up the papers from the floor. This is a humbling position and even though he shows no sign of change it is a visual indication

⁴²Ibid.

that change is necessary.⁴³

As the students take their first practice test, they are shown as not interested and having a great deal of difficulty concentrating. To reveal their thought processes rap music is played in the background. The lyrics communicate verbally what the students' attitudes are towards education and the school as they state:

Never made first period for one year straight.
Forget the diploma, its education I hate.
I feel like grabbin my books and just rappin it,
Cause the way I feel I ain't making it, making it.
School's the place I really don't want to be in.
The day I quit that's it I'm leaving it.
When people tell me about getting grades up
My reply--am I getting paid or what?
Right in the morning my alarm awakes me.
My mom knows she's a witch, she hates me.
Failing all my classes I don't give a damn.
Success--I ain't making it.⁴⁴

The words clearly convey the negative attitude of the students. Being in a no win situation where they are failing, they have given up trying. There is no sense of pride or internal motivation to do well. The school is a holding place where they are marking time until they can leave.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Within the context of the film, no fathers seem to exist outside of the parents' meeting with Clark and there they blend in with the crowd. The main students in the film, Sams and a girl named Kaneesha, are fatherless. Only mothers are shown or referred to in connection with education.

Not only does Clark provide a father figure for the students but strives to make the school seem like a home away from home. Given the poor environment that the students at Eastside High School come from and the absence of a two parent family, one place that can substitute for home is the school. This of course implies that the high school teachers and administrators must perform more than their job expected role. They must perform as an extended family.

Clark's focus is definitely on the students. This is further underscored by Clark's immediate response to a call to help the student, Kid Ray, who is being beaten up by a former drug dealer and student, Brian. Clark also does not hesitate to help Kaneesha Carter, a former student of his, whose mother apparently doesn't want her. Along with Ms. Levias he visits Kaneesha's apartment in a housing project

at evening time. Bathed with blue light to communicate a sad mood, a lamenting song is sung at the beginning of the scene. The words, meant to be the thoughts and feeling of Kaneesha's mother, convey the idea that life is passing by and the feeling of despair that she won't find someone to love.

While the scene begins with helping Kaneesha, it is really about helping her mother. The lyrics focus on her needs. She is seen looking depressed in her small, dark, and poor basement apartment. Mrs. Carter is an example of an unwed mother who at fifteen quit school to have her child. Since she didn't want welfare, she worked nights. Only now is she able to have a personal life. However, she also sees herself for what she is and is ashamed to have her daughter see her. Thinking of herself as a poor role model she chooses the only alternative she finds--giving her daughter up to a foster family.

Clark and Ms. Levias are now operating outside their expected education roles and are put into the position of social worker. While this may be seen by some as crossing the line of their professional responsibility, it also points out the interconnectedness of life in and out of the

school. What goes on in the home directly affects the students and this in turn affects their ability to learn. Education does not take place in a vacuum--in an institution devoid of outside influences. Teenage pregnancy is an issue that needs to be addressed. A mother at fifteen does not have sufficient education to be properly prepared to attain a better life. Leaving school locks her into a life of poverty and despair. This in turn affects her children.

The rise in teenage pregnancy is a social, as well as an educational issue. To help the student, Kaneesha, Clark must help the parent, Mrs. Carter. If she can find a better job it will also allow her to live in a better environment. In this way she will be able to keep Kaneesha. Otherwise Kaneesha will also be an educational casualty, because Clark can not see her making it in life without her mother's help.

This scene also serves as a contrast to the relationship that Clark has with another mother, Mrs. Barrett who, unlike Mrs. Carter and Mr. Clark, supports maintaining welfare. This for Clark is undermining people's self esteem. His different attitudes towards the two mothers can thus be seen as his way of communicating his own belief and value system. If the school is expected to teach

students to be self-motivated and take responsibility for their lives, then parents need to support these ideas. Otherwise the school and family environments will be sending conflicting messages making teaching more difficult.

Clark is portrayed as a revolutionary. Given the power he sets himself up as champion of his students. He justifies his position on the grounds that the students are not being taught anything, because no one has a personal stake in the school. He believes that the educational process: "is turning blacks into a permanent underclass." It does not prepare them to function in society. From his point of view then there is no good obtained by the teaching of the music of Mozart. It is not an appropriate subject, because it has no utilitarian function. What poor students need is an education that will help them get a job. He thus justifies his actions to Dr. Napier in a courtroomlike setting placing himself in a position of acting above the law. Dr. Napier in turn reaffirms that change is possible within the education system. As a realist, Dr. Napier sees Clark's actions as alienating people which will result in

failure to affect change.⁴⁵

It is evident in the next scene that Clark has made one concession to Dr. Napier by bringing back Mr. Darnell who helps in trying to prevent the fire chief from entering the school. Clark, like Rick in The Principal, carries a bat and calls himself Batman. To Ms. Levias' pleas that he is creating a bad image, Clark excuses his actions by pointing out that he would not have any problems with the fire chief if he could have the special emergency locks on the doors that the white schools have. The problem is Eastside cannot afford them. This raises the issue of funding for education. Schools dependent on property taxes for money cannot deliver the same kind of education. In poor black neighborhoods there is little money while in affluent white neighborhoods there is much more. Under such a funding system economic segregation is perpetuated and can also be seen as contributing to the perpetuation of a permanent underclass.

Not only must Clark fight an uphill battle against the system in terms of getting the things he needs for the

⁴⁵Ibid.

school, but he must also be prepared to deal with student casualties. For Kid Ray it is too late. He feels that he is not cut out for school. The outside environment is exerting a stronger influence on his life and he sees himself as moving on. Clark on the other hand communicates that without an education Kid Ray has no chance of survival: "You'll be dead in a year son." he says. Even though Kid Ray is street smart and has profited from the streets as shown through his wearing a well tailored suit and gold chains, he has also had to pay a heavy price.⁴⁶

Sams is presented as a contrast to Kid Ray. He is very unsophisticated and can still be reached and helped. Being in school, however, means the necessity to learn from books, rather than immediate experience. As Clark points out: "How are you going to get an education if you don't read?"⁴⁷

Just as important as reading, however, is being able to sing the school song for Clark. He is presented with a new spiritual version that praises the name of the school,

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

while communicating a belief in the value of honor and loyalty. The music is appropriate to the students' culture. Thematically the introduction of gospel music also furthers the savior/preacher role that Clark is playing in the school. He is there to help the students' spirits rise from the dead--to make education once more come alive and flourish in the cemetery that was Eastside High. The old school song, like Mozart, speaks to past generations and is something that the students now find boring. To make it even more meaningful, Clark asks for the song to be taught in English and Spanish. Thus the sensitivity to culture is expressed and the need to give it voice in the educational system.

When the practice test results indicate that there is still a 70 percent failure rate, Clark begins to mobilize all his resources by getting everyone involved. He places blame on the teachers for not being properly prepared and giving extra help to those who need it. At the same time he indicates the necessity to go the teenagers' homes and have their parents become involved, educating them as well if this is what is needed. The value of both parents and teachers working together in the educational process is thus

underscored.

To tie home and school together the film weaves images of teachers and parents helping the students learn. This is followed by Clark jumping rope in the gym with the students and telling Sams not to give up. The uniting of adults and children towards achieving a common goal shows the importance of cross generational communication in the education process. The use of the colors red and blue is also a constant reminder of the importance of education in a democratic society where the school plays a central role in preparing the young to take the place of the old.

The film, however, shows that any change from the traditional educational system carries with it potential opposition and is tied to politics and those who can manipulate the system for their own benefit. Thus Mrs. Barrett, while not having any real background in education, places herself in a position to become a school board member where she can vent her anger on Mr. Clark. Since the mayor needs black voter support for reelection he succumbs to her political blackmail which promises to deliver the needed votes. The issue of who controls education and for what reason is a key problem that the film alludes to. Education

is seen as a tool of politics that can be manipulated in order to maintain the political structure, rather than respond to the needs of society.

Another issue that is also brought up is that of the personality of the principal and how it affects the school. While Clark is shown as a warm and loving father figure towards the students, he continues to be in Ms. Levias' words "an ego maniacal windbag" who whips his staff and teachers who are not in a position to fight back and takes credit for everything, despite the fact that there are 300 teachers working with the students. The need for a strong, but supportive principal and his/her relationship to all members of the education community is thus stressed. Teachers want to know that their efforts are appreciated and that they play a key role in the good, as well as the bad outcomes of the students.⁴⁸

The pep rally in the auditorium before the basic skills test is reminiscent of a revival meeting where the preacher gathers together his flock and shows them the way to their salvation. The auditorium is filled with warm

⁴⁸Ibid.

light and everyone is nicely dressed and orderly. Clark begins his persuasive speech by stating some common conceptions that people have of ghetto children: "They say you're inferior. You're just a bunch of niggers, spics and poor white trash. Education is wasted on you. You cannot learn. You're lost." To then emphasize that the white students have no particular advantage, he asks the white students to stand up saying: "These are my white children. They have no place to go. We sink, we swim, we rise, we fall, we meet our fate together." Clark thus creates a feeling of community among all the students, staff and teachers and reassures them that as their spiritual father he will be there for them. As they all begin to sing the song, Lean on Me, the visuals show the physical and spiritual coming together of people and the lyrics of the song convey the message that everyone needs a friend to lean on and they will help each other. In a diverse, multicultural society that is torn apart by economic divisions and dysfunctional families the film thus offers a substitute model by portraying a high school world where people can work together, take pride in themselves and learn. In such a world view education does have value and

people can once again believe in the possibility of a better tomorrow.⁴⁹

Despite the rosy picture painted in the auditorium scene and the upbeat music during the basic skills test, the film makes it clear that nothing is attained without continued struggle and that one has to be constantly on guard against the forces of evil. Thus the scenes showing Mrs. Barrett gaining political control, Kaneesha revealing that she is following in her mother's footsteps of being an unwed mother, and the fire chief entering the school and having Clark arrested, all point to the need to maintain a realistic perspective. The belief in the need to respect the law is also put forward as Clark tells his students that: "You break the law you have to pay the price."⁵⁰

The following jail cell scene iconographically portrays the connection between Clark and Christ. Clark looking like a familiar painting of Christ awaiting his crucifixion, is dressed in white and looks out the window as light pours through the bars. Frank reassures him that his

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

teachings have borne fruit as he tells him that he has: "accomplished a miracle. The kids have a light in their eyes that was never there before."⁵¹

This is followed by the streets filling up with the students as they march on the courthouse. The students have been empowered by Clark, and as they exercise their first amendment rights, they take their first big step towards being a citizen in a democratic state challenging the reasons behind Clark's arrest as a Hispanic girl, once encouraged by Clark to study law, states to the Mayor: "You talk about laws, but you're twisting the laws. Laws are made to protect the people."⁵²

The students make it clear that Clark is their father figure: "The only father that some of us that don't have fathers know."⁵³ As they stand up for their right to be heard the students begin their transition into adulthood, just as the students did in The Explosive Generation. No longer do they represent a violent, drug-infested, dead-end

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

school. Instead, as the test results which are announced affirm, the students have begun to see the value of education and are capable of learning and contributing to society.

The freeing of Clark and his subsequent hugging of Sams as they walk away from the courthouse represents the belief in the ability of an individual to triumph in the face of adversity. Despite its faults, the educational system can work. This is further visually communicated in the last scene of the graduating class with the American flag shown in the background. Lean on Me thus embodies the idea that one man can make a difference, and that a strong, yet caring father figure is important not only for the immediate family, but also in a school setting to help teenagers as they make their way through the transition into the adult world outside. Education is the key to a better life.

What the films of the 1980s communicate about the black experience tends to vary depending upon whether the school is predominantly white or black. Black students in white schools are positively portrayed. Some, like Otto and Joseph, are smarter than the average students, hard working,

neatly dressed and warm human beings. Some are very good football players who are well regarded by those around them. Girls like Vera and Denise are happy outgoing personalities that have supportive mothers. From cadet officer to running a school class president campaign, black students are shown as capable and hard working.

In films about poor, urban and mainly black populated schools the students portrayed range from those who are basically good and once given a chance will do well to the gang leaders and drug pushers who have no redeeming qualities. In the end, however, it is the good students who are successful.

Black adults are seen as positive influences and as competent in whatever position that they are portrayed in in films that focus on the white experience. Whether as teacher, principal, janitor or lawyer they are shown working well within the educational system. The only thing that distinguishes them is their darker skin tone.

The majority of black adults in films that focus on predominantly black schools is also portrayed in a positive light. The principals in Wildcats and Lean on Me are dedicated to their schools and in particular to their

students. Although they are very different personalities, they both exemplify what can be accomplished when a principal really cares about his school. Secondary characters like Ms. Levias and Jake also show adults who try to do their part to help the principals succeed.

There are no black fathers focused on in any of the films and all the black adult males are portrayed as single. In contrast, black mothers appear in several of the films. The most sympathetic portrayal is that of Mrs. Carter, an unwed mother who does not want her daughter to repeat her mistakes in the film Lean on Me. The most negative portrayal also appears in the same film when a disgruntled mother, who supports welfare, opposes the new principal after he kicks her son out of school.

As the 1980s progress more blacks in a greater variety of roles are portrayed in films, as well as, black schools. While blacks dominate the educational process in the predominantly black school in Lean on Me, whites continue to appear as major factors in the education process in black schools. Both the white coach in Wildcats and the white principal in The Principal are effective with black students because they can relate to the teenage culture and work by

establishing direct and friendly contact with the students. It is the personality of the people and not their race, that ultimately becomes important in the learning process. Most students can be taught if they have a safe environment, someone that they can communicate with, and respect those who are willing to teach them.

Films about the black experience continue to show the importance of teenage culture, the need to belong to a peer group and the importance of cross generational communication--particularly in predominantly black schools. Unlike films about the white experience, there is a greater emphasis on formal, rather than informal education for black students. Education has practical value by providing opportunity for a better life. In the American democratic society education is seen as a key for upward mobility for minorities. This is not only reflected in films about the black experience, but also in those which deal with the Hispanic experience. Films about minorities tend to focus more on the high school as an educational institution and the importance of principal/teacher-heroes.

CHAPTER 7

THE HISPANIC EXPERIENCE

The Hispanic experience in American high schools is represented in four films of the 1980s. It takes on a secondary role to films of the white and black experiences, with the exception of Stand and Deliver. Generally, a few Hispanic students appear in films dealing with either urban schools or predominately lower class black schools. They are rarely the main characters and their problems are for the most part not seen as important as those of the white and black students. The diversity of cultures classified under Hispanic makes it difficult to make many broad assumptions about the Hispanic high school experience. Films dealing with schools on the east coast generally have Puerto Rican students, while films about the west coast and in particular California have Mexican or Chicano students.

Fame

The 1980 film, Fame, introduces a poor student named

Raul Garcia who has Anglicized his name to Ralph Garcy in order to remove himself from his Puerto Rican ancestry. His only ticket out of a ghetto environment is through the education he seeks at New York City's High School of the Performing Arts. Education for poor minorities like him is seen as having great value when that education has a direct relationship with future employment. Only through its availability in a public institution is access to a teacher in the performing arts possible. Otherwise the expense would be prohibitive. The school thus is presented as a very important positive factor because it provides opportunity in a democratic way.¹

The Hispanic environment as communicated in the film is one filled with violence, drugs and poverty. As the film discloses, Ralph's father is in the penitentiary because he brain damaged one of his daughters by slamming her head into a wall in a fit of anger. His mother provides substitute fathers by renting out an extra room in their apartment and inviting them into her bed. Ralph takes pills to make

¹Fame, 35 mm, 130 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Santa Monica, Calif., 1980. (For a discussion of the plot of Fame see Chapter 4.)

himself feel good. Junkies roam the streets which are shown littered with the debris of decaying buildings and devoid of any vegetation. Despite this Ralph is shown as driven to find a way out and being loving and protective of his two younger sisters. His compassion for them indicates that he still is open to change and capable of learning given the right circumstances.

The only role model that Ralph has is from television --the Puerto Rican comedian, Freddy Prince. Even the local priest does not exert any influence on Ralph. He is presented as having an unrealistic attitude towards dealing with life by insisting that Ralph's mother and sister seek guidance from God, rather than take Ralph's younger sister, who has been molested by a junkie, to a doctor.

As one of the main characters in the film, Ralph is shown in a very positive way struggling to become a man and enter adulthood. While formal education in the high school is seen as being useful, the important education is that which he gains through his peers. Burdened with adult responsibility at an early age, Ralph has not yet developed a sense of identity. The fact that he pretends that he has a father who works for the government can be seen as a way

of not only conning his way into the school, but also of creating, along with his name, an acceptable self image. Furthermore, his trying to be a comic and do drugs like Freddy Prince show his inability to be comfortable with his own self image.

The two students in the film that help Ralph through his high school years are two Anglos--Doris and Montgomery. They both are in a position to help him because they must interact together in their drama class. Not only do the classes encourage self disclosure, but they also teach the students not to be afraid of what others think. Learning in the classroom thus encourages the social skills that the students will need to survive among themselves and eventually in the adult world.

While Ralph comes from a culture that values "machismo," he learns to open up his feelings and disclose himself to a female and to a homosexual. Doris in a sense is the mother that he has never been close to. At the same time she also is his girl friend, as well as a best friend who is not afraid to tell him that he is more than the comic role that he plays to mask his deeper feelings.

Montgomery is portrayed as a caring individual, who

like Ralph, has not had a close relationship with his mother. As an actress she has had to travel a great deal leaving the fatherless Montgomery home alone. This helps link the two teenagers together despite the obvious taunting that Ralph gives Montgomery about being gay. When Ralph fails in his comedy act, it is Montgomery who waits for him and tries to cheer him up. He reinforces what the school has tried to teach Ralph about an artist not being afraid of exposing his feelings nor worry about what other people think.

Ultimately neither the high school nor Ralph's friends can provide him with all the answers that he seeks to know. When he asks Montgomery, "How do you know if you're good?"² no reply is given. There are some things which cannot be objectively measured. This touches on an issue that is never really dealt with but which is crucial in teaching and learning in the arts. What is good art and how can it be measured? Unlike education in science, math and even English, it is difficult to quantifiably measure how good a student is in drama, dance or music.

²Ibid.

Another educational issue is whether or not teenagers will actually like the work for which they are being trained. Ralph points out that Freddy Prince hated being a comic once he became successful. He thus must face the real reasons why he is pursuing an acting career and if it is really suitable to his personality.

With limited opportunity for Hispanics to make it in the Anglo world, teenagers often turn to famous figures as role models. Sports and the arts can be thought of as easier to succeed in because of limited book based education. Unfortunately, not only are these career paths highly demanding and extremely competitive, but not always emotionally rewarding. As Ralph learns by trying to be a stand up comic, being funny every night is no easy task and facing rejection in a real situation can be devastating. Luckily for him his education is shown as providing him with a core of friends who can understand and respect him as a human being. Being included in a supportive peer group is the most important part of his high school experience. They are his extended family and as such of great value in living in an uncertain world.

The educational experience that Ralph has in the film

is unique, just as the school is unique. Not only is there a multiethnic and multiclass mix, but students interact with each other on a one-to-one basis. Although there are no Hispanic teachers, the black and white teachers appear to treat everyone as an individual based on their artistic merits. The students learn because they want to. The education is technical in terms of art and practical in terms of career preparation. A high school diploma in this school is usually the end of the formal education line. The teachers try to prepare the students as much as possible for real life in their chosen professions. The Hispanic high school experience in this school environment is thus presented in a positive light.

The Principal

The 1987 film, The Principal, while dealing with the black high school experience, also presents the Hispanic experience by showing a Hispanic teacher and Hispanic students in a poor urban high school setting. They are all treated warmly and are seen as caught between the forces of good and evil, between the white and black worlds. In general they are respectful of education and try to work

within the educational system.³

The Hispanic teacher, Hillary Orozco, is a friendly beautiful young female history teacher who enjoys teaching and has a fair amount of control over her students. She communicates directly with them and does not hesitate to speak her mind to the new white principal who would place disruptive students in her class. She puts in extra time working after school and helps a Hispanic student, Arturo, learn to read. The respect that the student has for her also communicates that she is a caring teacher.

Unlike the other teachers in the school, Miss Orozco does not give excuses for not teaching nor is she seen as apathetic. She is a positive force and her students are presented as capable of being reached. Her classroom, the only one shown in the film, is visually presented as one where learning is going on through its lighting and the map and other decorations on the walls.

The two Hispanic students, Arturo and Raymi, who are dealt with in the film are both seen as afraid of the black

³The Principal, 35 mm, 110 min., Tri-Star Pictures inc., Culver, city., 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of The Principal see Chapter 6.)

gangs and trying to escape from them. Arturo is presented as a young boy who is not ashamed to turn to Jake (the head of security) and Miss Orozco for help. His interest in learning to read shows that education does have value for him. What is never explained is why he has not been taught to read before entering high school. Although not made clear, one assumption is that basically nice students like Arturo fall through the educational cracks because they are not aggressive or stand out in any way. As shy, respectful students, Hispanics are sometimes ignored. Only teachers of their own ethnic background who can understand their needs are able to communicate with them and help them.

Raymi, while looking older and stronger than Arturo, is also afraid of the black gang leader Victor and does not hesitate to hide from him. He is very realistic in his appraisal, seeing himself in an environment from which there is no escape. He knows that Brandel High School is a dumping ground and that he has little chance of bettering himself. When confronted by the principal, he responds strongly to being called a sissy. The need to maintain his manly dignity overrides any respect that he might have for a teacher. His justification is that Rick has disgraced

himself in his former position and therefore, does not deserve any respect as principal of Brandel.

The basic goodness of the Hispanic students is demonstrated when the principal comes to them after his motorcycle has been taken apart and he has been beaten by Victor's gang. Since Rick has not been complaining about his pain, he is seen as a fighter in a ring who has withstood a beating like a man. The students, while not jeopardizing their own safety by revealing his attackers, offer to fix his motorcycle. They are sympathetic to his predicament and respond in a positive way.

The school's auto shop is shown as one predominantly populated by Hispanic students. No teacher is present, yet the students are shown getting along and working together. What is implied is that the Hispanic students are not a disruptive element in the school and can be highly self motivated. The fact that the students can fix Rick's motorcycle also communicates that the students not only enjoy, but are also very adept at learning a trade. Just as the black student, Miller in Blackboard Jungle, found that being an auto mechanic is a good job for a minority, so here the point is made that Hispanic students can achieve a high

level of knowledge in fixing cars and motorcycles which is very useful in surviving in their present environment.

The Hispanic students are shown taking pride in their work. They do not just fix Rick's motorcycle--they also enhance it by writing Rick's title as principal on the motorcycle and helmet. The importance of a title in the Hispanic culture is thus communicated by the students' actions. Rick, whether deserving or not, is the principal and has to be addressed and treated as such. In a culture that respects authority and teachers, the groundwork for establishing a sound educational basis is made that much easier.

The only insight that the film gives into the thinking process of a Hispanic student is through a composition written by Raymi. It reveals that he has a good rapport with his father by his ability to talk to him. At the same time, it tells of a longing to get away from the environment in which he and his father are caught. He dreams of being a hawk who can fly beyond the rooftops of his environment and of owning his own body shop. At the same time, his writing tells us of the pain that students like Raymi experience, because they cannot see any way of fulfilling their dreams.

Perhaps the best example of the positive connection between the Hispanic culture and education can be seen at the end of the film. Rick's concern for Arturo and Miss Orozco's safety motivates Arturo to no longer be afraid of Victor. He literally and figuratively goes to bat for his principal by entering the school alone in order to defend Rick. Using Rick's baseball he effectively knocks Victor's gun from his hand. Afterwards, he stands with Jake and Rick facing the students. When a student asks Rick who he thinks he is, Arturo states Rick is the principal. The way Arturo says this communicates that he is proud of Rick and that his position as principal of the school should be respected. This also indicates that the groundwork for success in cross generational communication has been established between them leading the way to a better learning environment. The educational institution is something that has value for Hispanic people in this film and is important in their lives.

Lean on Me

In the 1989 film Lean on Me the Puerto Rican students presented are in the minority along with poor whites in an

urban lower class and predominantly black high school. Only two Hispanic students stand out. Kid Ray is a well dressed, mild mannered and warm individual. While he is somehow connected with a black drug dealer who attacks him, he does not appear to be on drugs and does not act as a dealer. Instead, he appears as a self assured and very likeable person. He understands the importance of dressing well as a form of nonverbal communication as he tells the principal Mr. Clark that he is wearing a nice suit just like him in order to look the part. Kid Ray values money and what it can do socially as he points out to a friend that the way to get a girl to go out with you is to flash some cash and buy her some gold.⁴

The source of his money and his suit indicates that he is probably doing something illegal, but the film never provides any information. When he tells the principal that he is leaving, real affection is shown by Joe Clark who tries to discourage him from going, predicting he will be dead in a year if he chooses to leave. Kid Ray, however,

⁴Lean on Me, 35 mm, 104 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Lean on Me see Chapter 6.)

does not see education as something of value in his life: "I don't think I'm cut out for this school and all." His world view is based on short term goals and living in an environment where violence and death are an everyday occurrence. The high school offers nothing to help him with his immediate survival concerns.⁵

The second Hispanic student portrayed in the film is an assertive female who is not afraid to ask the principal what he is going to do for the Hispanic students. Joe Clark recognizes in her outspokenness a talent for law telling her: "With a mouth like yours you otta be in law." He thus points her in a positive direction where a high school experience and education can make a difference. Towards the end of the film she is able to confront Mrs. Barrett who is a disgruntled mother trying to persuade the students that Mr. Clark is breaking the law and not doing anything good for them. As she answers Mrs. Barrett, it is evident that the Hispanic girl believes herself capable of representing all the students saying, "You talk about the law, but you're twisting the law. Laws are made to protect the people. He

⁵Ibid.

believes in us." The film thus shows how an educational institution through one of its members, in this case the principal, can help empower youth to promote change by giving them a way to voice their opinions along democratic principles. Having a female Hispanic woman be the voice represents a strong role model for the Hispanic population.⁶

In a world of violence, neither Hispanic student is portrayed as violent. They are both shown as likeable and able to speak with the adults around them. They are also respectful of the principal and supportive of other students. The film thus communicates that the Hispanic students are basically good people who are easy to get along with and who show promise of doing something better with their lives. Education for them can have value if they are reached in time.

Stand and Deliver

Stand and Deliver, produced by Tom Musca and directed by Ramon Menendez in 1988, is unique in its depiction of the Hispanic experience. Based on a true story, this film portrays the impact of a Hispanic teacher, Jaime Escalante,

⁶Ibid.

on the lives of his Chicano students in a high school in East Los Angeles. Although Mr. Escalante is originally from Bolivia, his knowledge and appreciation of the Chicano culture allows him to successfully communicate with his students.⁷

In contrast to the portrayal of black neighborhoods, people in the Chicano barrio are shown as busy. The streets are alive with the activities of men, women, and children. Men are seen selling produce, dressed as musicians or going somewhere on the back of pickup trucks. Children are running and laughing in the streets. Women are walking by stores with colorful displays. Prominent are the muffler shops which cater to a culture where a car is likely to be a man's most important possession. There is a shot of a discotheque conveying the value of dancing for a people who see this as an important social activity. The music background also gives a sense of a more lighthearted outlook as an aspect of this culture.

The high school is presented as relatively clean and orderly. There is some vegetation in front of the school

⁷Stand and Deliver, 35 mm, 105 min., Warner Brothers Studios, Burbank, Calif., 1988.

which makes it look spacious. The white interior is bathed with light throughout most of the film. Very little graffiti is seen. The students look relaxed and generally socialize with each other. While the school is in a poor inner city area, there are no indications of violence or drugs. The one gang that operates within the school does not seem to have a large following and none of the students appear threatened. There are no guns or knives shown and outside of a classroom chair being broken, nothing in the school is destroyed. The extent of the violence in the high school is perhaps best represented at the beginning when the police are shown investigating a break-in. Outside of some typewriters being taken and some fecal material left in the office, the school is unaffected.

The principal of the school, Mr. Molinas, is shown as a reasonable and likeable administrator. He sits in on teachers' meetings and he is seen several times in the film. He appears to have a good attitude towards the students and the other teachers. When Mr. Escalante later asks to change the normal math curriculum and school hours for his students to prepare them for an unprecedented AP exam in calculus, Mr. Molinas provides needed support. His openness to change

allows the system to better meet students' needs.

The math faculty as presented are diverse and include a Hispanic woman, Raquel Ortega, a Japanese man and a white man who has been trained as a physical education teacher. The white man is fairly typical of a high school coach type --big, awkward, and not very bright. He is, however, concerned about being a good math teacher as he confesses to Escalante that he spent a great deal of time reading the math book to be adequately prepared to teach the students.

Raquel Ortega, chairman of the mathematics department, is seen as cold and aloof. She has set ideas about what the department can do to keep from losing its accreditation. Mrs. Ortega, representing the status quo, gives environmental conditions and lack of resources as the reasons why the students do not do well. Her outlook is very negative and she lacks insight and the ability to change. When her ideas are threatened, she withdraws.

Jaime Escalante is presented as a well educated man who has an extraordinary desire to teach. Although there is never any indication that he has any educational training, his former well paying job in the electronics field indicates a strong mathematical background. He is shown as

a good family man who is well loved by his wife and children. Although he has a comfortable house, there is nothing pretentious about him. He drives a Volkswagen Bug and dresses in casual clothes. Both the way he walks and talks communicate a humble and sincere person with a clear sense of purpose.

The Hispanic students for the most part are depicted as nice, with strong family ties. There is little rowdiness or disrespect towards Mr. Escalante when he enters his classroom. The value of sex over math in teenagers' lives is quickly established as a student asks if sex can be discussed in class. The problem of language is also established as several students do not respond to the English instructions. The general feeling in the classroom is depicted as one of good-natured youthful vitality. At the same time, there is little interest in education. The students are there because they have to be. Math 101 is remedial math--something that should have been mastered at the elementary school level. The fact that junior level students are in the class indirectly demonstrates that they have not yet attained the minimum acceptable math skills.

Although Mr. Escalante has his car radio stolen on his

first day of class, his lack of anger communicates a person who is capable of overcoming adversity. He takes it in stride along with the entrance of two Hispanic gang members into his room. His easy going manner and his lack of intimidation communicate a strong and resilient personality that can bend with the wind. His method of teaching is directed towards the students' experiences. Dressed as a cook, he uses apples as concrete examples in teaching fractions and percentages. At the same time, he talks to the students in their own street dialect, using special rhythms to get close to them. Unlike the tendency of teachers in other cultures to keep a certain physical distance from their students and use a loud and authoritative voice, he imposes his presence by standing next to a student and almost whispering. This creates a nonthreatening intimacy with the person to whom he is talking. In this way, he also tries to get to know the students better so he can win their trust.

The film shows the importance of socialization in Hispanic culture. In a society where family and community are of primary importance, knowing the person you are dealing with is an important first step. Each person is an

individual and seen as unique and of value. In getting to know each of his students, Jaime does not concentrate only on the bright and cooperative ones, but deals with them all as members of a learning team. Then, he tries to motivate them to the level of his expectations. To do this, he teaches them in a step-by-step fashion having them work in unison. He thus preserves in the classroom the importance of the cohesiveness of the Hispanic society, with each person playing an important role as part of an extended family structure.

The guiding operational principle is one of respect, rather than of fear. When confronted by the gang members, Escalante not only understands that he must hold their respect to teach them, but also that the general respect that teachers are held in by the Hispanic culture will assist him in the short term. By showing the gang leader how to use his fingers to do multiplication and naming him "finger man," he begins to establish his power over the classroom, which he tells the students is his domain.⁸

Escalante also understands that the students

⁸Ibid.

themselves need self respect in the educational environment. To build their self-esteem, he tells them that basic math is too easy for them. Next, he uses every day examples of what the real job prospects will be for them if they do not change. As he states: "If all you can do is add and subtract you can only be prepared to pump gas." Then directing his remarks at the gang members and mimicking their way of talking, he tells the class that tough guys without the proper math skills, will probably end up deep frying chicken for a living. Having gotten their attention through his verbal and nonverbal communication, Escalante then makes an important connection between math and Mayan ancestors. Again using a concrete example of digging a hole in sand to answer a math problem, he leads Angel, one of the gang members, to find the solution--zero. He then works on building the students' confidence and pride by letting them know that it was their ancestors, rather than the Greeks or the Romans, who first contemplated the use of zero. Thus, the students begin to believe that they have an innate capacity for math which he communicates to them by saying, "You burros have math in your blood." In a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy technique, Escalante makes the students

believe that they are good in math and begins to use a recitation and question method to help them learn more advanced mathematical principles.⁹

The following faculty meeting scene points out the contrast in educational views held by Mr. Escalante and Mrs. Ortega. While he has a positive view of what education can accomplish and of the ability of the students, she believes that education can do little to help the students. Instead she blames the environment for the students failures by saying: "If you want higher test scores you start by changing the economic level of this community." In her opinion failure is due to lack of resources to implement the changes demanded by the district and to the fact that the students who come to the school are often illiterate with most having barely a seventh grade education. Mrs. Ortega, unlike Mr. Escalante, thus justifies placing blame for educational failure on factors other than the present teaching in the high school.¹⁰

This scene also illustrates some faculty problems in

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

many high schools across the country, retention and use of qualified people. The Japanese math teacher is leaving for a job with NASA indicating that the school is losing one of its brighter teachers. At the same time, the physical education teacher remains part of the math department, despite his objections that he is not really qualified in this field. This raises an important educational issue as to who is teaching in the public schools and what is being done to keep properly trained teachers in the system.

Only the new teacher, Mr. Escalante, seems to believe that conditions can improve and that he can accomplish something at the school. His idea is simple: "All we need is ganas (desire)." By instilling the desire to learn, the students will meet the expectations of the teachers. This places responsibility for learning on individuals, both students and teachers.. It is the requisite for self-motivation.¹¹

As part of making the students responsible, Escalante clearly communicates what is expected of his class. Each day there is to be a quiz with no free rides or excuses. At

¹¹Ibid.

the same time, he gives them a means to overcome the prejudice others have of Hispanics saying: "You already have two strikes against you. There are some people in this world who will assume you know less than you do because of your name and your complexion, but math is the great equalizer." Math is thus of value because it can support ethnic pride and establish the Mexican-Americans as being as good as anyone else in this country. It is a nonviolent way for people to assert their rights in a multicultural society.¹²

Before Escalante can become effective, however, he must deal with several pressing issues of his Hispanic students. By establishing the social environment of several of the students the film tries to communicate some of the obstacles to learning often faced by students from this particular ethnic and lower socio-economic class background.

Angel, as a gang member, cannot be seen by his gang carrying around books. As Escalante accurately understands: "You wouldn't want anyone to think you're intelligent, huh?" Being book smart is thus not seen as a good thing by Angel's

¹²Ibid.

peers and this attitude is detrimental to learning. At the same time Angel has an ill grandmother who does not speak English and for whom he must care. Since no other family members are shown, the assumption is that they are living on welfare. The frustrations of life are visually presented in a scene where Angel must wait for his grandmother to be seen in a medical clinic. Despite this, Angel has a warm and loving relationship with his grandmother. It is an important influence on his personality and shows that he is capable of handling responsibility.¹³

Angel, who has learned to survive in a bleak world, knows how to use whatever he has to get what he wants. There is no one outside the school who is concerned with his education. Even when Angel is expelled from Escalante's class for being late and has his grandmother intercede to get him back in school, her concern is that he will be deprived of lunch rather than of an education. What seems to motivate him in math is the personality of Mr. Escalante who communicates in a language he understands and who prods him to give the right answer to one of his questions. In a

¹³Ibid.

world where machismo is important, Angel is shown that he can learn and still retain his macho image.

Pancho (Garcia Fernandez) is another type of student. He is more concerned with girls and immediate gratification than with long term goals. He is a short-sighted individual who looks for a way to fulfill his needs. Although his family is never seen, the fact that he has an uncle who will get him a union job indicates the importance of family connections in this community. Pancho wants to make money to buy a car which he hopes will help him get a girl. His future vocation is of secondary importance. He lives in a cultural world where the idea of limited opportunity is a way of life. As Escalante points out to him, he is concerned with the next turn rather than the road ahead. He is thus likely to wind up like most Chicanos on a dead end path.

This is coupled with his belief that he is not as bright as the other students. His large bodily frame, mechanical ability and poor self esteem make him an unlikely candidate for the stereotypical American image of a bright math student. To reach him, Escalante becomes like an extended family member and has him experience in concrete

terms through a car ride the difference between concern for a short term goal like a turn, rather than the road ahead. When the car comes to a sign that says "dead end," Pancho begins to realize the importance of education.¹⁴

Claudia, an attractive and popular young woman, comes up against another cultural attitude that stands in the way of her educational progress--that Chicano men don't like women who are smart. Physical, rather than mental attributes, are more important for women in a Hispanic society. The film communicates this by what her mother says to her as Claudia tries to get parental permission to take calculus. While her mother is busy dyeing her hair to look more attractive, Claudia tries to explain the origination of calculus. Rather than being happy about her daughter's desire to educationally succeed, Claudia's mother is cautious and skeptical. Each perceives the world and the importance of math and education in a different way.

Ana, like Claudia, is another Hispanic student who also begins to move away from typical Hispanic cultural expectations as she becomes more educated. Her father does

¹⁴Ibid.

not support his daughter becoming too highly educated. The role of women in the Chicano culture is to get married and have children. While some education is all right, too much education is not needed. What is also conveyed is the idea that Ana is part of a social structure that considers cohesive family groups of great value. Too much education could unbalance the structure, particularly in the case of a woman.

A third teenager in the Hispanic environment is Guadalupe. As the oldest daughter she is expected to care for the family while her parents work. She prepares meals for her father and takes care of her siblings. Although Guadalupe is seen as trying to study at night her mother tells her to turn off the light she is using to study. Symbolically, the light can be seen as knowledge. The film communicates that Guadalupe, as well as the other teenagers in the film, are discouraged from learning by their parents. Within the barrio is a well defined way of life where roles are set and expectations limited. With relatives around to provide love and help, the students will be able to survive. In the Chicano culture, the Hispanic students are not taught to value college education. They only need to learn a

limited amount.

Escalante is uniquely qualified to help the Chicano students break the dead end education cycle. As a Bolivian he comes from a different Hispanic culture than his students. While he has lived with Chicanos and can speak their language, he lives in an Anglo community outside of the barrio. His wider perspective on life sees where opportunity can lead. His Hispanic side connects and feels for his students. Since he knows what his students and their parents value, he can offer a nonthreatening way of change.

The dialogue between Escalante and his students also offers a glimpse into Chicano culture. Neither fully Mexican nor American, Chicanos are caught between two cultures. They are "wannabes," (a word used by the author to mean people who want to be something else). They want to retain their rich cultural Mexican heritage, while sharing in their version of the American dream. The good Anglo life beyond the barrio is defined by television and film-- something that is not real and cannot be attained. Escalante, however, sees a way for the students to move out of the barrio and be on equal footing with the Anglos.

Education, in particular mathematics ability, can be the great equalizer among various cultural groups. It is a key to get into a good college and open the way to opportunity. Escalante and open the way to opportunity. Escalante is appropriately nicknamed Kimosabe (the one who knows), symbolizing the person who can give the students the information needed to succeed.

While visiting a computer center and hearing that an Anglo child is learning calculus in high school, Escalante realizes that the best way for his students to compete in an Anglo world is to learn calculus also. Having already made a vital connection between the students' Mayan ancestors and the concept of zero, he builds on the ethnic pride of his students. For students with little mathematics background and weak in reading skills, he starts with concrete examples from everyday life, before going on to more abstract aspects. He also recognizes that in their group oriented culture he must mobilize everyone to work together. Through a variety of techniques like a ritual of clapping on the desks and imitating a particular action, the students become a cohesive body.

Another educational technique that Escalante uses is

constant reinforcement. Telling Angel he can solve a math problem, calling Gabriella a top student, congratulating Pancho when he gives the right answer helps maintain high self-esteem. At the same time, he keeps reminding students that their next goal of learning calculus is attainable: "We will go step by step, inch by inch. Calculus was not made to be easy, it already is." He stresses that it is as easy as tic tac toe, a game they all have probably played and won as children.¹⁵

Discipline is in the form of shame. When Gabriella doesn't do her homework she is made to sit in front of the class in addition to completing the homework. Escalante thus makes the students understand that it is much better to do the work than to try to get out of it. Finally, he asks each student and their parent to sign a contract to do what is required in his class. This strengthens psychologically the students' commitment.

As the students learn, their perception of themselves and the world around them begins to change. Claudia begins to see the possibility of doing something that will make her

¹⁵Ibid.

less dependent on a man for the rest of her life. Angel realizes that he has a ticket out of poverty. When he understands that the stars people see are not necessarily where they are perceived to be because of the time it takes their light to reach the earth, so also does he understand that his old way of thinking has changed. Like Adam who has bitten the apple of knowledge, Angel is no longer satisfied with staying in his barrio of Eden.

In his own way, Escalante once having tasted the joy of teaching, becomes addicted. Working overtime at his regular high school job, helping junior high students and then teaching English to adults at night is far beyond the expectations for any teacher. What the film communicates is a portrait of one who is driven. It is not a realistic portrayal of a Hispanic teacher or of any other teacher. Escalante and his accomplishments are unique. Having students dedicate extra time including Saturdays and their summer and Christmas holidays to learning is an extraordinary feat and one that can only be done with a very special teacher. The fact that all his students pass the AP Calculus exam is amazing given that less than 2 percent of seniors nationwide even attempt the test.

The Hispanic experience in the film is not representative. When the College Testing Service questions the results from the students at Garfield High, the film communicates in part what a feat Escalante has accomplished. It also, as the film points out, communicates what the Anglo world perceives as normal for Hispanics. That students from a Chicano barrio school could finish the test with time to spare and make fewer than four mistakes on the multiple choice section as compared with fourteen to eighteen mistakes made by students from other schools is simply unbelievable. As the examiners tell Escalante: "With scores this high I guarantee you'll be questioned regardless of the school." and "Why don't you encourage the students to retake the test. If you don't, everyone will assume they cheated." Escalante's reply then underscores the prejudicial view that people have of what Hispanics can do as he says: "If this were Beverly Hills High School they wouldn't have sent you two to investigate."¹⁶

Outsiders are shown as not alone in questioning the capabilities of the Hispanic students. Ana's own father

¹⁶Ibid.

believes that someone must have cheated. Mrs. Ortega also thinks that there must have been some dishonesty for the students to accomplish what they did. Her reasoning is that Escalante put the students under so much pressure that they would have done anything to please him. She supports her opinion by what she sees on television news where there are many examples of people who deny any wrong doing to get off being punished. Her lack of confidence in the students and in Escalante can be seen as representing one of the reasons why Hispanic students do not do well in school. She is not a risk taker and as the head of the math department is the gatekeeper to math education. Her attitude towards the students is reflected in her response to Escalante when he first proposes to teach the students calculus: "If they try and don't succeed you'll shatter what little confidence they have. These aren't the types that bounce back."¹⁷

Following the scene with Mrs. Ortega, Escalante finds that his car is missing from the parking lot. Given the importance of having a car in Hispanic culture, its absence undermines his confidence and he perceives it as a sign that

¹⁷Ibid.

his teaching is doomed to failure. With so many people questioning the ability of the Hispanic students, Escalante too begins to have self doubts about the merits of education in helping students better themselves. He sees the enormity of the task to convince others that Hispanic students can be as good as and even better than students from other ethnic groups when it comes to math. In a moment of self doubt, he confesses to his wife that:

I may have made a mistake trying to teach them calculus. . . They learned that if you try real hard that nothing changes. . . They lost their confidence in the system that they're now finally qualified to be a part of.¹⁸

Escalante, in his own way, begins to see only the turn in the road, rather than the road itself. His wife helps him by providing the necessary family support so crucial in Hispanic culture. Reminiscent of Dadier's wife in Blackboard Jungle, Mrs. Escalante points out to him that the students have come to love him and: "Regardless of whether they passed the test or not. . . they learned." To underscore the importance of Mr. Escalante's accomplishment, Angel returns his car. It has been repainted and fixed up

¹⁸Ibid.

as a way of thanking his teacher despite the fact that Angel and the other students are still thought to have cheated on the test.¹⁹

For Escalante and the Hispanic culture the implication of cheating involves the honor of the entire Hispanic community including the school and parents, as well as the students. With retaking the test as a matter of honor, there is no other choice to clear their reputation. In a Rockiesque style Escalante communicates his confidence to his students saying, "You are the true dreamers and dreamers accomplish wonderful things. You're the best and tomorrow you'll prove that you're the champs." Education has changed the culture of these teenagers--their attitude towards life and what they can accomplish, their belief in themselves, how they view the world as they begin to understand how the planets and stars move in the heavens, and what is of value.²⁰

The benefits of education and how it can impact on culture is communicated in Stand and Deliver. The film

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

indicates that in a culture where there are strong family ties, peer pressure plays a lesser role. While there is a separate teenage culture, teenagers who have to take on more family responsibility are likely to act more like adults when given the opportunity. Finally, the place of a devoted and nurturing teacher who can bridge the generational communication gap is seen as a crucial part of learning. Given the chance to learn, students can through desire overcome learning obstacles. Hispanic students are just as capable as any other ethnic group.

The Hispanic high school experience as communicated in Fame, The Principal, Lean on Me and Stand and Deliver is very positive. Hispanic students, while faced with poverty, violence and discrimination do well in a nurturing high school environment. They tend to be respectful of the teachers and administrators and less likely to initiate violence than white or black students. Family support for education is an important consideration in their culture, particularly when girls are involved.

In only one film, Fame, is there a negative reference made about a student's parents. In this case it concerns a Puerto Rican family. While the parents are never seen nor

heard, the neighborhood is shown as very poor. The visual impression given is that is an environment of hopelessness. In contrast, when parents in other films are shown, they are portrayed as loving and caring.

In The Principal and Stand and Deliver, the male students are shown to have excellent manual skills when it comes to repairing cars and motorcycles. Since no teachers are shown helping them, the idea communicated is that much of their training is peer based. The students also use the repairing of motor vehicles as a way of expressing their gratitude in a culture where such vehicles are considered important possessions and gift giving an expression of affection and respect. Both films also show the dedication of Hispanic teachers. Miss Orozco goes out of her way to help her students, just as Mr. Escalante does.

Like other teenagers, Hispanic students have their own language and value system. Being able to talk to them as Escalante does in Stand and Deliver, helps break the generation gap. Instilling pride in their ethnic origin also helps in providing motivation to learn.

The Hispanic experience includes the major themes of the "teenage education" genre. Cross generational

communication, or the lack thereof, is an important part of a teenager's life and impacts on the learning process.

Teacher/principal-heroes are more successful when they directly communicate with the students and treat them with respect. They also are able to establish vital links with adult members of a teenager's family to facilitate formal learning.

Being included in a peer group is a concern--especially for students who have little or no parental support. It provides a sense of belonging and acts as a base for informal learning. This is particularly important in a culture where family plays such a strong role and being part of a group is the accepted norm.

Hispanic high school students also have their own teenage culture with its own language and modes of behavior. Unlike white teenage culture, however, subcultures and socio-economic differences do not seem to be an issue. The only subgroup portrayed is that of a gang.

The Hispanic high school experience, like the white and black, is mainly dominated by males. While mechanical ability, which has practical value, is shown as valued by the students, formal education is not. At the same time all

of the films about the Hispanic school experience portray formal education in a positive way and two out of the four films encourage students to continue on to college.

Hispanic experiences are depicted only in the public high school environment during the the 1980s. The private school experience, like most "teenager genre" films, focuses on the white, middle class, male world. There is more stress on formal education in the private school experience with educational institutions being portrayed as more repressive and inflexible and adults as powerful forces that have a great impact on teenagers' lives.

CHAPTER 8

THE PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

During the 1980s there were three films which presented three different types of private high school experiences. Taps took place in a military academy, The Chocolate War dealt with Catholic school education and The Dead Poets Society was concerned with a college preparatory school for upper class children. All the films were dramas focused on white male experiences.

Taps

Taps, directed by Harold Becker and produced by Howard B. Jaffee and Stanley R. Jaffee in 1981, deals with the education provided by a private military academy known as Bunker Hill. The head of the school, General Bache believes in strict discipline and instilling the values of God, country and above all, honor. The curriculum is geared towards preparing students for further military training at such institutions as West Point and Annapolis. The goal is

to train young men for a military career serving and protecting their country.

The school is visually portrayed as one steeped in tradition, clean, well maintained with architecture and student uniforms dating back to the nineteenth century. Its 141 years of existence have, as we are told in the opening scene, produced fine young men who have made the ultimate sacrifice of giving up their lives while serving their country. It is a world unto itself--physically isolated from the town around and out of touch with the civilian world. Even the two television programs watched by the cadets, Mash and Star Trek, deal with military situations.

General Bache sees the school as more than an educational institution. It is a home where he functions as a father figure looking after his sons. As a former student himself, having arrived at Bunker Hill at the age of twelve, he closely identifies with the students and their needs. He is portrayed as a grand old man who has earned the respect of his cadets. His beliefs and values dominate in such a closed educational environment where the past is kept alive through its traditions, just as former cadets' names are kept alive by being cited from the Book of Remembrance as

part of the commencement ceremonies. General Bache's world view is that man is meant to be a warrior and all are sons of Viking fathers. He is not, however, oblivious to the fact that the outside civilian world looks at the school as an anachronism and portrays military leaders as crazy in movies. According to the General, the outside world has a negative view of military training because schools like Bunker Hill train young men to value honor in a world that holds it in contempt.

General Bache, while not being portrayed as mentally unbalanced, is shown living in the past. He retells old battles and the cadets are knowledgeable about what he has done in his life. Since his world revolves around the military and its history and values, the students are taught to view the world in terms of a military subculture. It has a hierarchical social structure where one is taught to obey those above. Independent thinking is not encouraged. Instead a kind of rote learning dominates--doing what one has been told. In such a subculture the structure is clear cut and everyone knows their role. Discipline is not a problem and school loyalty can be counted on. The educational problem that Bunker Hill poses is one of

adequately preparing students for life outside of its walls. Training young men for a military life at such an early age does not provide them with the education they need to survive and function well in the larger American culture.

The opening chapel scene has a slow camera movement down the center aisle. It is a strong balanced shot with people filling the seats on either side. Order and stability are thus visually communicated. At the same time the song "Onward Christian Soldiers," which is heard before the visualization of the scene, prepares the audience for the military school setting and the goal of the school-- preparing good Christian men to become soldiers. When General Bache appears at the end of the sermon in the first scene, he stands directly in the center of the shot. He thus becomes the pivotal point for the whole film and dominates the action just as he dominates the scene. His speech and movements are slow and deliberate. As he stands at the podium in the shape of a golden eagle, the shot is framed to make him look as if he is riding on the eagle's back. The message communicated is that he is a person of power and the school is his kingdom.

General Bache is the only teacher shown in the film.

His beliefs and values are the prevailing ones at Bunker Hill. When he asks the cadets to help him preserve the school against the forces of change, he establishes it as a battleground, just as the namesake of the school was a battleground during the Revolutionary War. Although the film names the Board of Trustees as the enemy that is going to sell the school for monetary gain, it uses the town itself in the form of a taunting undisciplined group of teenagers to mark the beginning of the battle. The cadets are not able to resist a response to the name calling that their dress and demeanor invoke. They are thus seen as caught outside the security of their school in an environment where they are not able to deal with the situation. By having the general's gun accidentally kill one of the town's boys in the ensuing scuffle, the film symbolically can be seen as communicating that battles are not the glorious recollections of adrenaline rushes, but the reality that one has killed another human being.

With General Bache being taken away by the police and subsequently hospitalized for a heart attack, the students are left to defend the school by themselves. They are thus placed in a situation that they do not know how to handle

and which they must face without any adult guidance. At seventeen the ranking cadet major, Brian Moreland, is thrust into a position of leadership that only has meaning within the walls of the school. The outside world treats him and his fellow students without any consideration of their needs. The film portrays most of the adults in a negative way. They refuse to take Brian's demands seriously and try to dismiss him as a child. For students like Brian who truly care about their education the idea that adults would put money interests above the value of education is not reasonable.

The negative attitude towards parents presented in most high school films is also shown in this film. Brian's father, who also is a career military man, is portrayed as one who lacks communication with his son. As Brian recalls, upon the death of his mother he was taken to a chapel and ordered to cry alone for exactly fifteen minutes. Shortly afterwards at the age of twelve he was sent to Bunker Hill. This past incident is related to establish the lack of feeling between father and son and the controlling nature of Brian's father. When Master Sergeant Moreland confronts his son he refers to him as a kid and when Brian refuses to obey

his father he is slapped. Without an understanding father, Brian has no role model other than the General to guide him through the crisis he faces.

The film contrasts the lack of closeness and feeling that Brian has for his own father to the supportive fatherly relationship that Brian has with General Bache. In a private dinner scene between the General and his two cadet majors, the General describes a previous battle scene talking quietly and warmly about his experiences. He then has the two major cadets drink a toast with brandy. Being given an alcoholic drink signifies that Brian is now entering the adult world and that he is being looked upon with respect. Even when Brian confides in the General that perhaps he is unworthy of the position that he is being given because his motives for attaining it may have been selfish, the General responds in reassuring terms by saying: "Never be ashamed of being human. Without humanity a leader becomes a tyrant." The General thus allows Brian to communicate his feelings, while his real father doesn't. He becomes the substitute father that Brian needs. In all his demands in trying to deal with the outside world regarding the fate of Bunker Hill after the shooting incident Brian

asks to speak to General Bache and is willing to do whatever the General will tell him.¹

The tragedy that enfolds in the film can be seen as stemming from the loss of a teacher/father figure at a crucial time and the impending loss of an educational institution that has become home. This is coupled with the educational training that the students have been given which has not prepared them to deal with the more unstructured reality they face outside the school. Without guidance from the General, Brian can only mimic what the General has told him when he tells his fellow officers "These cadets will follow you only if they respect you." What Brian does is always from the perspective that this is what the General would want and would make him proud.²

Brian's roommate, Alex, is presented as one who can maintain a realistic view of the situation, even though he has undergone the same training. The only reason given is that he had a civilian mother so one may presume he has had more than the military world view. He questions what is

¹Taps, 35 mm, 118 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1981.

²Ibid.

happening from the very beginning when he asks Brian why he drank brandy offered by the General since he didn't like it. Unlike Brian, he is portrayed as secure in himself and not in need of a father figure. Trying to reason with his roommate, Brian, Alex tells him:

Bache is only a man like your father. Not every word out of his mouth is some holy golden nugget. Don't let this display of loyalty go to your head. Won't mean anything to the outside. They will say it's brain washing.³

Alex understands that General Bache is only human and what he has taught the cadets must be seen in perspective. Like any man, Bache is capable of error. Furthermore, Alex understands that the culture within the academy has different beliefs and values than the civilian population and that they are likely to be misinterpreted. He, along with another student, Eddie Webb, recognizes that without adult supervision some of the students might get out of control and misuse the roles and weapons they were given that were only meant to be part of their in-school training.

David Shawn is the leader of a group of cadets whose uniform includes wearing red berets. Relishing being a

³Ibid.

soldier, he is in love with the idea of being able to use his weapon. His red beret is a visual indication of his fiery temperament and his love of battle. From the very beginning when he shows off his troop in honor of Brian's appointment as cadet major, one can see that he is too much into his role. Having a loaded weapon gives him a sense of power and as the ending shows, his love of fighting outweighs even his loyalty to his leader. The film seems to use him as an example of what can happen to teenagers when they are given certain types of knowledge and left without proper adult supervision.

Some of the other students follow the stereotypical roles present in high school films. The person who tries to work the radio is a technical type. He is thin and wears glasses. There is the big strong less intelligent brute and an overweight "Shovel" who receives large food packages from home.

J.C. Pierce, the only black cadet with a speaking role, is treated like everyone else. The fact that he is the head of a group seems to communicate that race is not a significant factor at Bunker Hill. His preoccupation with the available food at the school in two scenes is the only

indication that he is probably not totally engrossed in being a soldier.

There are several references to Rebel without a Cause. Brian, while needing a strong father figure, is left alone to make decisions. Just like Jim, he becomes himself a kind of father figure to another student, a plebe named Charlie. Charlie, like Plato, has a mother who does not come to pick him up as expected, thereby leaving him alone. He also is killed accidentally while running just before dawn. Like Jim, Brian and the other students at the school are as stated by the national guard commander, Colonel Kirby, not seen "as rebels with a good cause." Unlike Jim, Brian has no father figure to turn to after Charlie's death. General Bache's death leaves him with only a film of the General with which to relate. He begins to question what he has been taught:

Were they just words--honor, duty, country? . . .
 There had to be something missing in all that he
 taught us or this wouldn't have happened . . .
 honor doesn't count for shit when you're looking
 at a dead little boy.⁴

The film uses the character of the national guard

⁴Ibid.

commander, Colonel Kirby, to also question the military training the students received at Bunker Hill. He lets Brian know that civilians view his actions from a different perspective. Instead of seeing them trying to preserve their school and follow the wishes of their teacher General Bache, Kirby tells Brian: "They see you as home grown terrorists. . . . Nice American boys don't act this way." Later after J.C. Pierce is accidentally burned, Colonel Kirby tries to convince Brian to give up the fight for the school to prevent the younger cadets from being hurt. He is surprised at the response. Brian replies that the final stage of any mobilization are the children--the seed corn. For Kirby this is totally unacceptable and he questions the system that instills such ideas as he replies:

What in God's name did they teach you in here?
What did they turn you into? . . . Dying is bad.
Someone sold you on the idea that dying for a
cause is oh so romantic. Well that is the worst
kind of bull shit there is.⁵

The film communicates that military training at the high school level and in a confined institution produces beliefs and values that are not realistic and which can harm

⁵Ibid.

both the students and the society around them. Students like Brian are trapped by such an educational system. This is visually reinforced in several scenes where Brian is framed by a window and the front gate in such a way as to make him seem trapped within the school.

The film also uses the playing of taps to signal that something is coming to an end. Not only will the school be closed and the property redeveloped, but the life of the General and several of his students will also end. When taps is played after the General is led away by the police, it communicates his impending death. At the same time Brian's face is shown in a tight close up followed by Charlie receiving a call from his mother saying she won't be picking him up as planned. This sends a clear message that both boys are doomed because they will be without parental guidance during the school crisis that has just arisen.

Taps ends by contrasting the reality of the cadets leaving the school filled with tear gas which looks like a battle field scene, with shots of the commencement parade from the film's beginning. It communicates the difference between the real and an artificial world. The values taught to the cadets work well within the confines of the military

academy. This is a world that is based on the belief that men are supposed to be soldiers. What the cadets learn to value are not necessarily values that they can use in the civilian world. Military education is thus seen as a limiting factor that does indeed brainwash its students. It provides only one acceptable role model for the young men and downplays independent thinking which is necessary to meet the demands of an ever changing world. For a modern society, Bunker Hill and its teachers are as General Bache rightly states--dinosaurs that cling to ideas that eventually will lead to their extinction.

The Chocolate War

In 1988 another film about a private high school experience came out called The Chocolate War. It was produced by Jonathan D. Krane and directed by Keith Gordon. The school is Trinity Prep, a boys Catholic high school, set in an urban setting and drawing its student body from the middle class. It also involves a battle, but the war is within the school and waged by the students and one of the teachers against a student named Jerry Renault who refuses to sell chocolates to raise money for the school.

Jerry is a fifteen year old freshman. His father is a pharmacist and his mother has recently died of cancer. In several flashbacks throughout the film we see that Jerry feels alone. There is a profound sense of loss because of the death his mother who was the one person in his life with whom he had a warm loving relationship. As the lyrics in the musical background express, she gave him the love that he needed. In contrast, his father, isolated in his own world, is seen sleeping on a sofa. A nearby table contains a liquor bottle and glass. When Jerry tries to talk to him, his father has nothing to say, acts depressed, and takes no interest in helping or doing anything with his son. Jerry thus is left to make his own decisions, guided only by the internalized values instilled by his mother.

From the very beginning, Jerry places himself in situations that test his ability to withstand pressure from others. He tries out for the football team. Despite the fact that he is physically small for the sport and gets knocked down, he still persists in playing--eventually winning respect from other players. This communicates that Jerry is a strong force who others will need to reckon with.

The school is presented as large, clean, very orderly,

well run and disciplined. Outward respect for the brothers teaching is maintained. The students follow directions and do the work prescribed. Although nothing is ever said about its academic quality, it may be assumed that it is a good school that teaches the same basic subjects as other Catholic prep schools. Only one class is presented where a brother is shown teaching a subject--a prehistory class on man and his environment. It is used as a plot device rather than giving any insight into the quality of the teaching. As Brother Jacques states: "It was at this point in history that man first ventured from the caves and began to deal with an increasingly hostile environment." The film thus communicates what is happening to Jerry Renault. Jerry loses the protection of his home and loving mother and is forced to deal with a hostile school environment.⁶

The film focuses on the importance of power and the use of intimidation in the school setting, from both the teacher and student perspectives. While the teachers can control the students through their grading power, some students are able to put pressure on other students to

⁶The Chocolate War, 35 mm, 103 min., Sterling, Inc., Los Angeles, 1989.

disrupt the classrooms and go against the teachers. Peer pressure thus can be seen to play a major role in the high school setting in terms of controlling both students and teachers. In this way, some students indirectly are able to control the whole school.

A secret society known as the Vigils operates underground and mimics the educational structure by assigning its own school work, "assignments," to students. It gives a small group of students a great deal of power. Unlike a gang that uses physical violence, this group of students relies for enforcement on the fact that middle class Catholic school students are more concerned about their self esteem. The Vigils thus are able to maintain their power by being able to isolate a student or place him in an embarrassing position in front of the whole school if he doesn't carry out his "assignment." As the Vigil member responsible for making the assignments, Archie clearly understands that as long as they do not punish the students physically if they refuse to carry out their assignments, the brothers in the school will not try to terminate the group's existence.

The Vigil's operate within their own code of ethics

and rules. In this way, they are able to communicate what it is they value and have their members act accordingly. They keep Archie under control by holding over him the possibility that he may have to take over one of the assignments. Using a box with six marbles, five white and one black, the assignor must choose one before the assignment begins. If he chooses the black then he does the assignment.

While never clearly verbalizing a class difference, the film uses the student Emile Janza as an example of lower class values. Unlike the other students, Emile uses physical intimidation to get his way. He is shown smoking and then threatening a student if he will not buy him cigarettes. Later in the film there is a visual contrast made between his environment and that of Archie's. Archie is shown in his bedroom which is very clean and tidy. He is placed in the center of the screen as he talks on the phone to Emile. Above Archie is a display of butterflies. He also holds one in his hand to symbolize that he is controlling the situation.

Emile, on the other hand, is shown on the left side of the screen sitting at a very messy kitchen table. He is

wearing a black T-shirt. A girl is also sitting at the table picking at her food and there is a younger boy playing on the floor. The room looks disorganized. A small television is playing on one side and there is the sound of a baby crying in the background. No parents are present and it looks like the children are left to fend for themselves. The idea communicated visually is that Emile's family is poorer than that of Archie's. The film uses the stereotypical view that a poor environment breeds violent behavior. Emile is later referred to as an animal and he in turn refers to the children who beat up Jerry as animals from his neighborhood.

The film communicates that within an educational environment the power given to teachers can also be used to teach, by example, the misuse of power. Brother Leon in the first classroom scene uses his stick to go from boy to boy and intimidate them while seeming to be monitoring a test. His potential for violence is shown as he pretends to accidentally hit a boy in the face that he is interrogating in front of the class. After he tries to humiliate the boy by his questioning and impersonating the student's walk, Brother Leon tells the class that what he has been doing is

giving them a lesson regarding Nazi Germany. By not standing up for the student and letting Brother Leon intimidate him, he admonishes the class for their passivity and not coming to the aid of the student. He thus tries to draw a parallel between their behavior and that of the people in Germany who did not stand up against the Nazi's actions against the Jews.

Brother Leon justifies his own display of power while aware that within the structure of a private Catholic school the students would not have been free to oppose the teacher. As Brother Leon himself points out:

A certain discipline must be maintained in a school. A line must be drawn between teachers and students. We teachers would love to be one of the boys, but that line of separation must remain.⁷

Brother Leon then by his actions mocks the students from the safety of his position. He is aware that the students have been taught to do what the teachers say and are helpless at stopping him from trying to hurt their classmate. The students, separated from the teachers and powerless to defend themselves from the tyranny of those in

⁷Ibid.

control, are to some extent like the Jews in Nazi Germany.

Brother Leon throughout the film is shown trying to use his position to make the students do what he wants. When he sets up the chocolate sale, it is his decision to double the price and the amount of chocolates each student is to sell. While he tells the students that this is "your sale--your project" and "Let me point out that Trinity forces no one to participate against his wishes. That is the great glory of Trinity.", he continues to pressure Jerry and the other students to sell chocolates. In desperation Brother Leon tries to force the Vigils to help, telling Archie that if they don't succeed in selling the chocolates he and the Vigils will go down the drain together. He also uses his power by intentionally giving a student a failing grade on a paper. Understanding how important grades are to the student, he offers him the possibility of reviewing his grade once the chocolate sale is over. To further communicate how corrupt Brother Leon has become, the film has him tell the treasurer for the sale to lie about how well the sale is going.⁸

⁸Ibid.

The Vigils, represented mainly by the assignments given by Archie, retaliate against the adult authority in the school. Jerry is told not to say yes to Brother Leon regarding his participation in the chocolate sale for ten days. Jerry's friend, Gooper, is told to loosen all the screws in the furniture in Brother Eugene's classroom. All the students in another teacher's class have to stand up and act crazy every time the teacher uses the word "environment" because Archie wants him to stop using the word in class. Archie thus uses his position with the Vigils to exercise his power over the students, just as Brother Leon uses his position as teacher to wield power over the students at Trinity.

Jerry Renault refuses to sell chocolates--even after his ten day assignment by the Vigils is over. There is never any clear reason given for Jerry's refusal to participate in the sale except that his decision is personal. In one of the film's flashbacks there is a scene at his mother's grave where a male doctor, priest and his father tell him there is nothing Jerry can do about his mother's death. It is God's will and he needs to accept it because as his father says it's: "Just Life." Jerry's

refusal to sell the chocolates despite pressure from the Vigil's and Brother Leon can be seen as a rebellion against what has happened to him and the powerful male authority around him that tries to control his life. He becomes a symbol against the tyranny within the school by student organizations like the Vigils and teachers like Brother Leon.⁹

The only other student who decides to stand up against the Vigil's and the school is Goober. Having carried out his Vigil assignment of unscrewing all the screws in the furniture in Brother Eugene's class, he is guilt ridden by his actions. He realizes that he did something that he didn't want to do. The result he sees as cruelty. He knew that what he was doing was wrong and that the brother involved would not be able to cope with the situation. The transfer of Brother Eugene from the school confirms the terrible toll that resulted from his action. Gooper, like Jerry, is able to see that "There's something really rotten in that school." He understands that both teacher and peer pressure are wrong and the only way to fight the system is

⁹Ibid.

by saying no to it.¹⁰

While acting without any parental support, Jerry is able to withstand the pressure of selling chocolates. He is eventually, however, tricked by Archie to participate in a boxing match with Emile Janza to get even for Janza having had him beaten up for not participating in the sale. The film seems to make a point that Archie has gone too far when he uses the power of the Vigils to pit one student against another. He not only is appealing to the worst sides of Emile and Jerry by forcing them to participate in a violent display, a boxing match in front of the whole school, but also uses the opportunity to bring into play the worst sides of humanity of the general student population. Archie recognizes that most people are greedy and cruel. His assignment appeals to the students' greed by establishing a raffle that has a large cash prize. At the same time the students in entering the raffle can decide who is to be hit and with what kind of blow. The students can be cruel as Archie says: "Watching two guys hitting each other in the ring unable to defend themselves, under their command while

¹⁰Ibid.

they're safe in the bleachers." He thus uses his power to create a situation that brings forth man's inhumanity to man.¹¹

The film then has the head of the Vigil's force Archie to draw two marbles representing the two opponents in the ring. What is being communicated is a shift in power to bring into balance someone who has gone too far. Since none of the adults are involved in this decision, the film suggests that teenagers are capable of making the right decisions in their subculture. Archie has gone too far. He loses his power symbolized by his choosing the black marble and having to take the place of Janza in the boxing match. The evil Archie is thus forced to fight the good Jerry. Ultimately Archie tries to gain an advantage. He breaks his own rule by cheating in the fight which frees Jerry from following the requests of his fellow students. After knocking Archie out Jerry basks briefly in the cheering of his classmates, but he soon realizes that sometimes even if you win you lose. A close up of Archie's bloodied face followed by a vision of Jerry's mother shaking her head and

¹¹Ibid.

Gooper's sad face in the crowd once again brings Jerry back in touch with his own values. Violence, even for a good end, is not justified.

The end seems to be a happy one with Archie being punished by having to trade places with another Vigil named Obie who acted as Archie's secretary in the beginning. The nature of the assignments thought up by Obie, however, no longer are aimed at the teachers but at the students. Having to bring naked pictures of one's mother or eat one's snot in front of the whole class are acts that aim to humiliate and degrade people. Obie thus seems to be using his power to get back at other students, because of the way he was treated by Archie. He is doing to others what has been done to him, just as Archie did to the teachers for what they supposedly had done to him.

The film not only criticizes the power of the teachers over the students and the power of peer pressure, but makes a contrast between the role of male adults and that of women --particularly a mother. Jerry has no male adult to turn to in handling the situations in which he finds himself. They are all cold and distant. The girl he meets at a bus stop states that he acts like he is middle aged referring to how

regulated his life is. She is warm and outgoing and later in his fantasy she kisses him providing him with the love and affection that he lost with the death of his mother. Women are thus presented as communicative and nurturing.

Throughout the film the image of his mother is also used as a reminder of her importance in his life. Her disapproval of his actions in the fight are a way of having the film visually communicate that Jerry has internalized values that she has taught him. In remembering her he becomes aware of what she would have considered was right. Winning through physical violence is not an acceptable course of action for him. It only reduces him to the level of the corrupt world around him. His mother has given him a perspective that sets him apart from the male adults and students.

What The Chocolate War presents is a Catholic high school that has become corrupted by power. The values of Christianity have been replaced by those of the world around it. Brother Leon acts neither as a friend nor as a father figure. What the students learn informally from Brother Leon's actions shape their behavior more than the academics. Through their own vigilante organization, the Vigils, they

mimic the adult world, learning the importance of greed and cruelty. Trinity and the Vigil's represent totalitarian situations with which high school students have to deal. What the film seems to be communicating is the need to instill in teenagers a clear set of values that allow for an individual to stand up for his beliefs, rather than to give in to the pressure of others.

The Dead Poets Society

The Dead Poets Society directed by Steven Weir and produced by Steven Hart in 1989 looks back thirty years in time to present an upper class private high school experience. The aim of Welton Academy is to prepare its all male white student population for acceptance into the Ivy League colleges where they will prepare for careers as bankers, doctors and lawyers so they can follow in the footsteps of their fathers or fulfill their fathers' dreams. The school's one hundred year history and its 75 percent success rate attest to its well proven curriculum and teaching. Set in the northeastern part of the United States, Wilton is surrounded by a beautiful country setting. It is fairly isolated from the world around it, with even

radios banned. The only means of transportation for the students is by bicycle. The school thus acts as a mini world onto itself which is free to shape the minds of its students as it sees fit.

The somber tone of the film is set from the very beginning with low key lighting and whispering voices as the school prepares for its opening procession. Everyone is well dressed and dignified. The banners held by the students proclaim the four pillars of education that support Welton's curriculum: tradition, honor, discipline and excellence. These are values sought by the parents in sending their sons to such a private school--values which are self-perpetuating as one generation of students passes them on to others. The high school students at Welton are thus taught to conform to the preferences of the society that they come from, doing as they are told and thinking as they are told. Their learning is strictly regimented by both their parents and the school.

The teaching and administrative staff are, with one exception, presented as older conservatively dressed males. They conduct their classes in strict conformity with clear rules and regulations. The science teacher requires

projects to be done at specified times, the trigonometry teacher asks for absolute precision in their work and the Latin teacher has the whole class keep repeating after him the words the students are to learn. Little time is left unsupervised. Male teachers monitor study periods and the students are not allowed to talk freely. In several scenes, it is made clear that the older men in the school are easily annoyed by the students and have little tolerance for any display of their exuberant pubescence. In this highly restricted world only one teacher stands out--the newly appointed English teacher, Mr. Keating.

Ironically, John Keating himself was a product of Welton. The only clue to his past is an old year book which indicates that even though he was an honors student, he also was a "man most likely to do anything." His return to Welton as a teacher gives him the opportunity to exercise his power as a teacher and bring about change. He understands the importance of education and how it can affect the students' lives. He begins a conflict that eventually pits the older generation of administrators, teachers and parents against the students:

This is a battle, a war, and the casualties

could be your hearts and souls. Armies of academics going forward measuring poetry. . . . My class you will learn to think for yourselves. You will learn to savor words and language. No matter what anybody tells you words and ideas can change the world.¹²

What Keating introduces to the students is another set of values saying:

We don't read and write poetry because its cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering--these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life, but poetry, beauty, romance, love--these are what we stay alive for.¹³

He further encourages them to live life to the fullest:

"Carpe Diem, lads. Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary." Keating thus sets into motion events which will allow a group of his students to experience both the ecstasy and the agony of going against tradition and the values of the older generation.¹⁴

It is clear from the very first classroom scene with Keating that his methods of teaching are original. He slowly introduces the students into a different view of the

¹²The Dead Poets Society, 35 mm, 124 min., Touchstone Pictures, New York, 1989.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

world, seeing things from a different perspective. As they look at photographs of former students they begin to see themselves as mortal--having a limited time on this earth to live. For this reason they are encouraged to "seize the day." Keating then has them stand on his desk so they view the world in a new way. This is an important step in empowerment. The students are thus taught by experiencing. By standing up and for once looking down on the world they place themselves in a position of power from which they can think for themselves, rather than simply follow blindly what others tell them. As Keating says:

We must constantly look at things in a different way. You see the world looks very different from up here. Just as you think you know something you must look at it in a different way. Even though it may seem silly or wrong you must try. Now when you read don't just consider what the author thinks, consider what you think. Boys you must strive to find your own voice. . . . Dare to strike out and find new ground.¹⁵

For Keating the goal of education is to make the students free thinkers and follow their dreams, rather than the dreams of others. What the film communicates, however, is that an educational institution like Welton is steeped in

¹⁵Ibid.

tradition and conservative. As one of the teachers, Mr. Mc Allister points out: "You take a big risk by encouraging them to become artists John. When they realize that they're not Rembrandts, Shakespeares or Mozarts they'll hate you for it." He thus voices concern about raising the expectations of students and the possible consequences that might result. He sees the danger of encouraging students to be free thinkers at the age of seventeen. A college preparatory school like Welton is not equipped to handle the type of students that Keating tries to create.¹⁶

As the headmaster, Mr. Nolan, points out to John, his unorthodox teaching methods are causing concern and tells him that the students he is teaching are at a very impressionable age. Learning that John had the students do exercises in different ways of walking in order to prove a point about the dangers of conformity, Nolan reminds him that: ". . . the curriculum is set. It's proven. It works. If you question it what's to prevent them from doing the same?" To Keating's reply: "I always thought the idea of education was to think for yourself." Nolan warns: "At these

¹⁶Ibid.

boys' age, not on your life--tradition John, discipline. Prepare them for college and the rest will take care of itself." Change is thus seen as dangerous by an established educational institution. Independent thinking is not encouraged. Teenagers are seen as too impressionable and not capable of making wise decisions. The older generation represented by Nolan does not want to see its position threatened by losing control over its students. Welton has only one goal--to prepare students for college. Much like the military academy, Bunker Hill, it has a narrow restricted view of the purpose of education and is not interested in helping its students learn more about other aspects of life.¹⁷

What Keating brings to the school is a less restricted view of the goal of education. The problem that arises is not only is the school not prepared for change, but also the parents whose focus is on formal education as crucial in preparing their sons for predetermined professions. For men like Neil's father there is only one goal in life for his son--that of going to Harvard and becoming a doctor. As

¹⁷Ibid.

presented in the film he has absolute control over his son's life. The choice of school, of studies and of career are what he has decided. To all of his son's protests he turns a deaf ear. Neil is constantly reminded that he must not disappoint his father nor his mother and how much it means to them--what sacrifices have been made to provide him with the education that he has. From the very beginning of the film when his father will not let him work on the year book, it is made clear that only academic learning in a classroom situation is acceptable.

The film presents a world where there is little or no communication between parents and their children. The teenagers do as they are told. They play the expected role of dutiful sons. Their lives have already been predetermined by the parents. Using Neil's father as the main example, the film shows a very cold man who exercises complete control over his son. There is no reasoning with him. As Neil seeks help from Keating to continue doing what he most wants to do--acting, he explains his relationship with his father. "Acting is everything to me, but he doesn't know. . . . He's planning the rest of my life and he has never asked me what I want. . . . I can't talk to him

this way. . . . They're counting on me. . . . I'm trapped." Thus Neil, like so many teenagers, can't communicate with his father. Although Keating wants to help, he is only able to do so indirectly by encouraging Neil to show his father what he feels and try to talk to him. While telling Neil that he is not an indentured servant to his father, the film shows that Neil has no choice with regard to his future. His father has already decided that Neil will be a doctor and refuses to even consider any other options. Not even Neil's mother is willing to listen to her son's wishes.¹⁸

Neil's parents are not the only ones who do not listen to their children. As Neil points out at the beginning of the film his friends would not talk back to their fathers either. They have lives carved out for them as well. Even Todd, Neil's roommate, is not able to communicate with his parents when confronted with signing a statement about Keating which he knows is not true. His father demands that Todd sign the paper without allowing Todd to speak while his mother sits by wordless.

Despite the tragedy that results from following

¹⁸Ibid.

Keating's teachings, the film also shows that a gifted teacher can influence students in a very positive way. Knox Overstreet overcomes his shyness with women and breaks out of his lifetime of calmness to pursue the girl that he loves. Todd Anderson is made to see that everything inside of him is not worthless and embarrassing.

For Neil and Charlie Dalton their new found passion for life has negative consequences. Once having seen things from a different perspective, Neil no longer can go back to being imprisoned by his father. His parents' complete lack of understanding leaves him with no one to lean on at a crucial time in his life. Taken away from his school and friends, his suicide is a cry for help that is not heard.

Charlie on the other hand is not shown constrained by parental authority. He becomes the most daring in taking on a new personality--Nuwanda. Painting his face and chest in Indian fashion he seeks the company of young women of his age and dares suggest that Welton open its doors to female students in the school paper. When Mr. Nolan demands to know the writer, he daringly uses a telephone and tells Mr. Nolan that he has a call for him from God. Along with his exuberance, Charlie also recognizes the reality of the

situation when Neil's suicide is investigated. As he says to his friends: "Do you think for one minute they're going to let this blow over. Schools go down because of things like this. They need a scapegoat." Refusing to cover up the truth, he becomes a casualty by being expelled. The fact that he comes from a wealthy family, however, softens the blow and implies that somehow he will be able to survive.¹⁹

For the students whose lives have been changed for the better by Keating, the final tribute upon his own expulsion from Welton is by standing on their desks and referring to him as "Oh Captain, My Captain" as he encouraged them to do during the first class meeting. Just as Abraham Lincoln (the captain that is referred to in a passage from a poem by Walt Whitman) led the fight against slavery, John Keating has led some of his students from the slavery imposed by their parents and educational institution to a new freedom. As Todd, the shyest, stands up on his desk, other students follow. Towering above Mr. Nolan who is threatening them with expulsion, the standing students visually stand out

¹⁹Ibid.

against the conformity of the students seated around them.²⁰

The film also communicates the importance of an environment which allows students to experience life and grow as individuals. Within the confines of Welton and under the supervision of the teachers their lives and ideas are strictly regulated. When Neil and several friends form their own social organization, "The Dead Poets Society," they move away from the school into the woods and into an old Indian cave. Separated from civilization they are free to explore their own feelings and ideas and come to terms with their own self concept--their perception of themselves as individuals. Within the cave they can be whoever they wish to be. What is communicated is the importance of going back to nature in order to find oneself. The learning that takes place outside the school structure is shown as valuable as that taught within the school. While the school teaches them the academic subjects needed for a successful career, only in the informal setting can they learn what they need to know about themselves in order to live rich fulfilling lives.

²⁰Ibid.

Unlike other films about high school experiences produced during the 1980s, the majority of the films about private school experiences (two out of the three) end with the death of the main student character. In all of the films an almost exclusive white male world is shown, including students, teachers, administrators and parents. Two of the main student characters are motherless only children and the third has little contact with his mother. All are unable to communicate with their fathers. Despite the differences in the schools, all three have student run internal groups. While Taps has a teenage hierarchical social structure established according to what has been set up by the school, The Chocolate War and The Dead Poets Society present secret societies that are set up by the students themselves. Each establishes its own modes of behavior. In all the films the main characters must struggle against what they see as the tyranny of adults. In two of the films, Taps and The Dead Poets Society, there is a teacher who takes on a father role from the student's point of view. In both cases, however, these teachers are unable to help the main characters in dealing with their fathers or in handling their problems. Leaving them alone

to cope with forces that they cannot control, the students have no chance of survival. Although Jerry in The Chocolate War manages to withstand both the pressure of his teacher, as well as the peer pressure in his school to conform, he also becomes a victim in the struggle. The only thing that saves him is the memory of his mother who has instilled an internalized code of behavior that disapproves of violent male actions. Private school experiences are thus not portrayed as particularly positive ones. While they may offer excellent academic programs, they do not adequately prepare the students for handling the nonacademic aspects of their life.

The private high school experience portrayed in Hollywood films of the 1980s continues to focus on the importance of cross generational communication. Like other "teenage education" genre films, the loss or lack of this communication results in tragedy or victimization. While teachers are in a powerful position in all three films to influence the lives of their students, their actions eventually result in the down fall of the main characters. Peer acceptance and teenage culture are less important in the private high school experience. Also absent are

portrayals of the woman's experience. The private school is shown as a male-oriented world. Women during the 1980s are almost exclusively portrayed in a public setting.

CHAPTER 9

THE WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE

While the majority of films made during the 1980s focus on the male experience, women appear in a variety of roles as students, teachers, coaches, administrators, staff and parents. Several films show women as main characters and portray the female point of view. Only in the private school experience are women almost entirely absent.

Fame

Fame, produced in 1980, portrays several different types of women. Coco and Doris are presented as warm, caring and capable students. They establish close relationships with the opposite gender in their respective creative fields of interest. Coco strives to be successful and move away from her poor environment that she is too ashamed to even let her friend, Bruno, know about. While appearing very strong on the outside, she is extremely vulnerable because of her desire to be successful. A phony

male film producer has her pose semi clothed on the pretense that he is giving her a screen test.¹

Doris is the obliging daughter of a pushy Jewish mother. While Doris is first presented as dominated by her mother, who goes with her when she auditions for the New York City School of the Performing Arts, she gradually begins to mature and make her own decisions. Her nurturing nature is important as she makes friends with fellow actors Montgomery and Ralph who are very needy, having no parents to support them emotionally. Their peer relationship becomes a kind of pseudo family--a base of belonging.

Two student dancers are also briefly focused on and portrayed in a cold negative way. Lisa is presented as not very talented and unwilling to devote herself to her work. She is expelled from the school. The other is a beautiful and talented newcomer who has difficulty relating to her wealthy parents. In what might be interpreted as a ploy to get attention she brings home a black dancer and seduces him. Her resulting pregnancy is secretly aborted so that

¹Fame, 35 mm, 130 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., Santa Monica, Calif., 1980. (For a discussion of the plot of Fame see Chapter 4.)

she can continue her dancing career. Neither woman student makes any friends at the school and, therefore, neither one is missed when they leave.

The teachers who have the most difficulty with their students are both female. The dance teacher, Miss Berg, is forced to make Lisa leave when she does not show sufficient progress in her dancing. While seeming cold and hard, the camera focuses in on Miss Berg after Lisa leaves to communicate that this was not an easy decision.

The English teacher also does not seem to be sympathetic to the plight of her poor black student, Leroy, who while a talented dancer, is deficient in his reading skills. Portrayed as a conservative, middle-aged white person, she is seen as limited by her own cultural background. To humanize what might otherwise be a very stereotypical portrait of an English teacher, she is shown emotionally suffering while waiting in the hospital where her sick husband has been taken. As Leroy tries to confront her about his failing English she cries out to him: "Don't you kids think of anyone but yourself?"²

²Ibid.

The only mother portrayed is Naomi, Doris' mother. It is obvious that she wants her daughter to succeed. Making Doris try out for the high school and being with her conveys the control that she has over her. Later on she also forces her daughter to sing at a children's birthday party, which is very embarrassing for Doris. The film uses her character to show the problems that are present in a parent-child relationship and the need for peer relationships where teenagers can communicate their needs and begin to take control of their lives, asserting themselves as individuals.

In dealing with the women, Fame tries to present a fairly realistic picture of some of the experiences of the students and teachers. Women, like men, need good peer relationships and suffer from problems in communicating with another generation. Female teenagers become pseudo mother figures for the males who need them. Teachers have difficulty relating to and communicating with their students.

My Bodyguard

My Bodyguard, produced in 1980, only presents two adult women, Clifford's grandmother and his teacher Ms. Jump.

Since Clifford is a motherless only child with a father who is constantly working hard at managing a hotel, Clifford needs a woman to provide a secure family structure. His grandmother is thus shown as living with him. She is presented as a woman with a zest for life who is constantly spicing things up at the hotel that they are living in. While she is an embarrassment to her son, she provides the cross generational communication that helps Clifford deal with the problems that he encounters. Having a close relationship with his grandmother enables him to talk to his new teacher, Ms. Jump, when he needs some crucial information.³

Both women are portrayed as warm and open human beings. Ms. Jump is shot to look like a soft young mother type who talks to Clifford like a friend. Her voice communicates an understanding of the emotional problems faced by the student, Linderman, after the death of his brother.

Clifford's grandmother also becomes important in

³My Bodyguard, 35 mm, 96 min., Tweentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los angeles, Calif., 1980. (For a discussion of the plot of My Bodyguard see Chapter 4.)

establishing a bond between Clifford and Linderman. When Linderman comes to visit the hotel, she takes his hand and tells him his fortune. The holding of hands is a strong nonverbal way of communicating to another person. Since no mention is ever made of Linderman's mother and he also is portrayed as a loner type, Clifford's grandmother provides him with some of the maternal nurturing that he needs to develop as a social being. By showing Linderman talking for the first time with his peers in a following scene, the difference made by a supportive woman is emphasized.

Taps

Taps, produced in 1981, as a private military school experience, has little to say about women. Except for the mothers who come to plead for the release of their sons and the female escorts of the cadets at a dance, women are absent from the school life. The importance of women, however, is shown indirectly by their very absence. Brian Moreland is the ranking cadet. As an only child whose mother has died, and unable to communicate with his father, he has no one to talk to in a crisis. The school becomes his home and the head of the school his substitute father.

His whole world is thus steeped with male values of honor and duty to one's country. Having no female perspective and taught to behave like a man, he is unable to perceive alternative ways to handle the school's dilemma. Likewise the plebe, Charlie, is left at the school because his mother doesn't come to pick him up. The result for both is tragedy.⁴

Tex

Tex, produced in 1982, portrays women as they affect the life of the main character who is another motherless male teenager, Tex. While attracted to a fellow student, Jamie, who is also the sister of his best friend, their relationship is shown as having no future. Jamie is a very outspoken and independent person who holds her own when having to deal with her brothers and Tex. Although she is in love with Tex she is realistic enough to know that a serious relationship between them would never work out. While Tex is an easy going poor farm boy with a love of horses, she is a rich man's daughter who wants more out of

⁴Taps, 35 mm, 118 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1981. (For a discussion of the plot of Taps see Chapter 8.)

life. Unlike most films portraying female teenagers as needing a man, Jamie is able to control her emotional attachment and can stand up on her own two feet. Having a strong father figure that she can communicate with gives her all the stability she needs.⁵

Another strong and able woman is Mrs. Johnson, the vice principal of the high school that Tex attends. While understanding of his problems, she also pushes him to look towards his future and find something that is good for him. Steering him to a job with horses, she provides him with a direction in life that fits in with his interests. She thus is a very positive influence.

Class of 1984

Class of 1984, produced in 1982, briefly focuses on two female teenagers. Deneen is a capable music student who wants to learn and who conducts the school orchestra in the absence of a teacher. When confronted by the gang that is terrorizing the school, she remains fairly calm. Her defense is trying to make her attackers afraid by telling

⁵Tex, 35 mm, 106 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1982. (For a discussion of the plot of Tex see Chapter 4.)

them that her brothers will retaliate if she is hurt. The other student is the only female member of the Stegman gang. No information is ever disclosed about her. Her function in the film is to aid Stegman and the other gang members whenever possible.⁶

Stegman's mother is the only parent presented. She is shown as easily manipulated by her son and unable to see what he is really doing. Like most of the parents of the 1950s she thinks that her child can do no wrong and the problem, if there is any, lies with the teachers.

Mrs. Norris is shown as a warm and caring wife, who like Mrs. Dadier in Blackboard Jungle, is expecting. While Mrs. Dadier ended up being supportive of what her husband was doing, Mrs. Norris is presented as trying to convince hers to get away. It is her rape and fear for her safety that finally pushes her husband to take action against Stegman and his gang. As a pregnant wife she is used by the film's plot to justify what is done to the students terrorizing the school. Being the wife of a teacher in a

⁶Class of 1984, 35 mm, 93 min., United Film Distribution, Canada, 1982. (For a discussion of the plot of Class of 1984 see Chapter 4.)

school with violent gangs is thus presented as opening up one's family to the possibility of retaliation. Neither Norris nor his wife can communicate with the likes of a Stegman who manages to control all the women affecting his life.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High

Fast Times at Ridgemont High, produced in 1982, begins as a look into a teenage girl's experiences of working, going out, and attending school. Stacey is presented as a young and naive girl who is encouraged by a slightly older friend, Linda, to begin having sexual relationships with men. The importance of peer communication and learning is presented as the two girls talk with each other. Linda is very willing to teach her friend all she knows about sex and men. The conversations are very open and Stacy is not afraid to ask her friend about sexual matters. It is apparent in some of their conversations, however, that Linda's outlook on life and information is fairly limited. Stacy does not always understand what she is being told and

lies at one point in order to seem more mature.⁷

Both students are presented as fairly shallow. Their only preoccupation in life is to have a good sexual partner. As children of the 1980s they see being sexually active and aggressive as normal. Even when Stacy becomes pregnant and decides to have an abortion, the only issue raised is one of money to help with the payment. There is no real agony either before or after the procedure is done and her parents are never told about it.

Although the world that Stacey comes from is fairly affluent, having a house with a swimming pool and adjoining changing room, the fact that she, her brother and friends work is presented as something fairly normal. With the emergence of the shopping mall, teenagers are given a place to go and socialize. Working at the mall is another good way to meet people and a legitimate reason to be away from home. Unlike the films of the 1950s where teenage girls never seemed to work, the 1980s shows that this is an acceptable activity.

⁷Fast Times at Ridgemont High, 35 mm, 92 min., University City Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1982. (For a discussion of the plot of Fast Times at Ridgemont High see Chapter 4.)

Formal education, however, still continues to have little importance. Linda is the only one that goes to college and this is related in terms of finding another sexual partner--a professor. Stacey and her friends are portrayed as mainly interested in having a good social life. The idea of a career or a college education is never presented.

Although Stacey's mother is shown kissing her daughter good night in one shot and appears to be warm and loving, she does not appear again. The film presents a world where parents have very little to do with their children's lives. There is no cross generational communication--even when the decision to have an abortion is made by Stacey. All important information comes from the peer group.

Not only are mothers not important, but fathers also seem to be absent. Male teenagers take their place. When Stacey needs to go to the abortion clinic, it is her brother who takes her. Mark, the movie usher, who is in love with Stacey, confronts his friend who got her pregnant. Afterwards Mark continues his relationship with Stacey thus establishing himself as her caretaker.

Wargames

Wargames, produced in 1983, has little to say about the woman's experience. The main character, David, helps out a girl in his biology class. She in turn is called upon to help him when he needs to find someone. The importance of peer relationships is communicated by the fact that when David runs into trouble he counts on a peer, rather than his parents to help him.⁸

The only two other women who are briefly shown are David's mother and a woman working for the military. His mother is in her own world concerned with her career. She has no idea of what her son is doing and does not seem concerned about him. The woman at the military complex is mainly portrayed as an assistant type who helps escort David and his girl friend in as the area is being closed. Women thus play limited roles in this film, helping when called upon to do so.

All the Right Moves

All the Right Moves, produced in 1983, contrasts the

⁸Wargames, 35 mm, 114 min., Metro-goldwyn-Mayer/Universal Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1983. (For a discussion of the plot of Wargames see Chapter 4.)

opportunities for poor women to that for men. Living in a poor mining town, the majority of students are likely to get married and have children, staying in the same place and working the same jobs their parents have. The frustration faced by talented students who have a desire to continue their education is expressed by Lisa, the girlfriend of the main character, Stef. While he is offered a college scholarship because of his ability in football, other brighter and more academically inclined students like Lisa are offered nothing. As she tells Stef, she is stuck in Ampipe. Although she wants to go to college and study music, her parents can't afford it. At seventeen her future is already determined. With her education she will probably wind up being a grocery clerk.⁹

Although some of the female students keep their men with them by getting pregnant as happens to one of Stef's friends, Lisa is shown trying to help her boy friend fulfill his dreams. She thus plays the self sacrificing female role. As a woman she is presented as capable of appealing

⁹All the Right Moves, 35 mm, 91 min., Twentieth Century-fox Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1983. (For a discussion of the plot of All the Right Moves see Chapter 4.)

to another woman, the coach's wife, to help her. Crossing the generational communication gap she is thus shown as both resourceful and mature.

The film draws a parallel between Lisa supporting her boyfriend's wishes and the coach's wife encouraging her husband in his quest to leave Ampipe. This creates a common ground of understanding. Another parallel is drawn when the coach's wife relates the sense of loss she had when her first boy friend left town without her. The possibility that Stef will never come back for Lisa is thus raised. This again points up her self sacrificing character and her role as helper.

Since Stef does not have a mother, Lisa provides him with the emotional support that he needs during times of difficulty. When he has problems relating to adults like the coach, she assists him. Her ability to communicate with him is presented both verbally and through music as she serenades him. Standing next to a sign saying "one way" she is visually portrayed as an Ariadne type who will lead him out of the maze that he is trapped in.

High School USA

High School USA, produced in 1983, is another film with women in secondary positions. Beth is a beautiful, warm and caring teenager who is pursued by the main male hero of the film, Jay Jay. As the girlfriend of Beau, the head of the preppie group, she is accepted as long as she associates with him. She is basically a nobody in his mind whom he has elevated by dating. Throughout the film he treats her as a kind of servant ordering her around. What is communicated is the discrimination between peer groups and the lower position women are often placed in by males.¹⁰

Another student who is interested in Beau and is of his class is also presented. She is portrayed as the obnoxious rich girl who tries to use her money to gain power and is disliked by other students. Her southern accent in a Midwestern school sets her apart and communicates someone who is very superficial.

Two more plain looking students are also portrayed. Not being part of the preppie crowd they are shown as

¹⁰High School USA, 35 mm, 96 min., Doron Productions Ltd., Calif., 1983. (For a discussion of the plot of High School USA see Chapter 4.)

conspiring to embarrass Beau as an acceptable way of getting back at him and his peer group. They present the female way of dealing with conflict. While Jay Jay challenges Beau to a car race, they seek a way to socially embarrass their enemy.

The only mother in the film is Beth's. She looks like she just stepped out of a 1950s film with her conservative dress and standing next to Beth's father as her daughter is escorted out by Beau. Commenting that her daughter should not lose her wealthy boy friend because they look so good together only highlights her artificial values. It is obvious that there is little communication between Beth and her parents. They are easily taken in by Beau and have no great depth as presented.

The two female teachers in the film are shown as soft, pretty, and very feminine. The home economics teacher has a southern accent, and like the preppie student, appears very shallow. She is always trying to cater to the men around. Miss DiAngelo, the physical education teacher in charge of cheerleading, has a little more depth. Seeing through Beau's attempts to control the other teachers like her boy friend, Mr. Plaza, she refuses to cooperate. Trying to

boost Jay Jay's and his friends' spirits and motivate them to go against Beau, her cheerleading chants look rather ridiculous. The function of her character, however, is to show up the more weak male adult response to students like Beau.

None of the women in the film come off as strong characters because of their personalities. They are there as objects of men's affections and as supporters of men. Beth needs Jay Jay to rescue her from an unhappy relationship and Miss DiAngelo can only indirectly help in reducing Beau's power by supporting Jay Jay. The focus is on maintaining social relationships with an acceptable person from one's peer group.

Valley Girl

Valley Girl, produced in 1983, portrays the experience of a more affluent female student who lives in the San Fernando Valley in California. Her world is one of belonging to the popular crowd, dressing well, going to parties and getting along well with her peers. Her problems begin when she finds herself unhappy with her boy friend and trying to find someone else. When she meets and falls in

love with a student from Hollywood High, she encounters peer pressure to end the relationship or lose her friends. What is communicated in the film is a segregated world where teenagers going to different schools have different teen cultures and values.¹¹

Unlike her friends, Julie wants more than someone who is good looking. Her seeking to go beyond her immediate group is partially explained by presenting her parents as different. Having been hippies in the 1960s they were into sex, drugs and "rock 'n' roll." Running a health food store where Julie works also indicates that they have maintained their own strong values, despite what others around them have done. This is further presented as they continue to use the language of their youth talking about giving Julie space and not doing things to upset her karma.

Both of Julie's parents are presented as warm and loving. They are unique in not forgetting what it was like when they were teenagers. When Julie comes to her father for advice, he talks about his own experiences and tries to make her see things from a different perspective. Rather

¹¹For a discussion of the plot of Valley Girl see Chapter 4.

than telling her what to do he states: "Let me know when you decide." In this way Julie, unlike most teenagers in the films of the 1980s seeks information from her parent rather than her peers. What is communicated is that by being able to talk with her parents she not only has a closer relationship with them, but is given sound advice and respected for whatever decision that she makes. In such a family learning environment Julie is not limited by peer pressure.¹²

Hollywood High, Part II

Hollywood High, Part II, produced in 1984, is a parentless world filled with sex, drugs and "rock 'n' roll" music. Women are seen as the main temptresses either in the form of three teenage girls or two female teachers. The students, Bunny, Kiki and Ginger are provocatively clad and then unclad high school students who spend the majority of their time drinking, smoking pot and making love to their boy friends. Likewise their two female teachers who are conservatively dressed at school are shown as seducing the three male students at their home. Even the one

¹²Ibid.

conservatively looking bright female student that is presented has another side to her. She is involved with a married man.¹³

The woman's experience that is communicated in this film is very stereotyped. Women teachers sexually exploit teenage boys. High school is one big orgy.

Teachers

Teachers, produced in 1984, portrays only one woman directly involved in formal education. Miss Burke, as the school superintendent, is a strong and attractive woman, but not very likeable. While she sees herself as battling for money to help the school, her trying to cover up the fact that the school is not fulfilling its teaching function makes her morally corrupt.¹⁴

Mrs. Pilikian, the divorced mother of an underachieving student, is portrayed as more interested in

¹³Hollywood High, Part II, 35 mm, 86 min., Lone Star International Pictures Inc., West Hollywood, Calif., 1981. (For a discussion of the plot of Hollywood High, Part II see Chapter 4.)

¹⁴Teachers, 35 mm, 106 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1984. (For a discussion of the plot of Teachers see Chapter 4.)

using the school to perpetuate the conflict that she has with her husband than to help her son who can't read. Her character is shown as cold and hard. Rather than taking any educational responsibility for her child she places the burden on the teaching staff. It is clear that she has no communication with her son and, along with her ex-husband, is a very negative influence.

The school secretary is shown to be an older conservatively dressed and unattractive woman with an annoying voice. She is efficient and tries to do her job but is portrayed as not very likeable. While she is necessary for the functioning of the school, no one appreciates what she does.

Only one female student is briefly focused on. Having become pregnant by one of the teachers, she is shown helpless to handle the situation. As a young, pretty and naive person, she turns to males for support in the form of a fellow student who then asks Mr. Jurel, the main teacher character, for help. Although she has parents, the film communicates that there is no way for her to talk to them about such a matter. Without cross generational communication, peers become the primary support system in

times of crisis.

The only woman who is portrayed in a positive light is a former student who becomes the love interest of Mr. Jurel. As a young, beautiful and idealistic lawyer, Miss Hammond comes to the school with a law suit which she hopes will make the system more responsive to the students. Shown as naive, she soon learns that the lawsuit is only about money and she cannot directly change the system. Her function is then to rekindle in her former teacher the love and commitment that he once had for teaching. She thus becomes his helper.

The film communicates the degradation that women have to go through to prove themselves and their ideas worthy of acceptance. Miss Hammond, in what is an over dramatic gesture, takes off her clothes in the school hall to keep Mr. Jurel from leaving. In this way she is also able to close the generation gap between them, opening up the possibility that she will become Mrs. Jurel, thus continuing to support the cause of the students while helping her man.

The Breakfast Club

The Breakfast Club, produced in 1985, uses two

students to portray two of the subgroups in the high school. The wealthy, pretty, and popular Claire belongs to the princess group. Although she does not necessarily like other members of her peer group and what they do, she maintains her affiliation because popularity is important in the teenage culture. Her concern with image is reflected in the way that she talks, her fashionable upper class suburban clothes and choice of sushi for lunch. Since she has problems in relating to her parents, her peer group provides the sense of belonging that she craves.¹⁵

Allison, as the basket case, portrays the poor little rich person who is also estranged from her parents and responds in a totally different way by becoming associated with the outcast group of social misfits. Not knowing how to relate socially, she is the kind of teenager who dresses to look out of place and different, while repelling anyone who might want to know her better. The need to belong, however, also propels her to attend a detention with other students her age.

¹⁵The Breakfast Club, 35 mm, 100 min., Universal Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1985. (For a discussion of the plot of The Breakfast Club see Chapter 4.)

Both students thus represent teenagers who have difficulty communicating with their parents. Being part of a peer group is extremely important. Their need to be, however, is shown as related to acceptance by the opposite gender. Allison is outwardly transformed by Claire and made to look attractive so that a relationship with someone like the popular athlete, Andrew can be initiated. In turn Claire is emotionally manipulated by Bender, the criminal. The power of the male over the female in teenage relations is underscored when Claire gives Bender one of her diamond stud earrings thus signaling that some type of relationship has been established between them. The only male who does not come away with a female affiliation is the brain, Bryan, who at the beginning of the film was shown being told what to do by both his mother and younger sister. The film thus communicates that teenage females are attracted to the physically stronger of the species.

Lucas

Lucas, produced in 1986, is another film which also focuses in on the importance of the male's physical ability for teenage women. Maggie, a pretty and new student, seeks

a sense of belonging in her new school. Although relating well to the very bright Lucas, she is ultimately attracted to Cappie, the head of the school football team. While she seeks a way towards peer acceptance through cheerleading and dating a football player, the film also communicates that she is to be viewed as a female making a biological choice for the future.¹⁶

Maggie also functions as a pseudo mother for Lucas. As a motherless only child with an alcoholic father, Lucas needs a sense of peer belonging to be able to successfully make it into adulthood. Although Maggie can't provide him with the close relationship that he wants, she does act as a mother who lets her child know that there is someone who cares about him.

The film bypasses dealing with Cappie's first girlfriend, who is also a cheerleader. The fact that she is afraid of bugs and becomes jealous when she realizes that there is another woman rival is shown to make her less acceptable. Her pain of losing Cappie balances out somewhat

¹⁶Lucas, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1986. (For a discussion of the plot of Lucas see Chapter 5.)

the pain that Lucas feels for losing Maggie. The film, however, does not dwell on her character but shifts its focus to the male perspective.

The only mother shown is Maggie's--a warm and caring person who has recently lost her husband to a much younger woman. Like Cappie's first girlfriend, however, this is not presented as very important. A very loose parallel is made between what happens in the adult world and that in the teenage world in terms of changing relationships.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off

Ferris Bueller's Day Off, produced in 1986, is another film where peer relationships are important--particularly between men. The purpose of Ferris' day off is more to help his male friend, Cameron, than to be with his girlfriend, Sloane. While Ferris is the mover and shaker managing every move, Sloane is seen as the warm and loving companion by his side. She follows along with whatever he wants, acting like Maggie as a kind of pseudo mother to Cameron. As the future wife of Ferris, she is presented as secure in the knowledge

of her role.¹⁷

Jeanie, as Ferris' sister has trouble dealing with a brother who seems to get away with everything. In keeping with the social dominance of the male, the film has Jeanie's jealousy get her into trouble with the law. At the police station another male teenager talks her out of her anger in a charismatic way showing her that the male knows best. This then socializes her to also become her brother's helpmate perpetuating the acceptable female role.

The film also makes a nice contrast between the vice principal, Mr. Rooney, as an officious authoritarian bureaucrat and his warm and lively secretary who shows her understanding of the teenager culture by naming all the various subgroups in the school and Ferris' standing with them. She thus presents someone more informed and in tune with the students than the male administration.

Ferris' mother is portrayed as a very capable real estate agent, but naive as a parent. Although she is easily duped by Ferris into believing he is sick, her character as

¹⁷Ferris Bueller's Day Off, 35 mm, 104 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1986. (For a discussion of the plot of Ferris Bueller's Day Off see Chapter 5.)

a caring and loving mother is seen as important in the development of Ferris' confident personality. In contrast to Ferris, Cameron has grown up in an environment where acquiring things is more important than personal relationships. Having no mother concerned about his health as Ferris has, he is likely not to have a good future marriage. Mothers are thus seen as important for their sons to develop healthy relationships with the opposite gender.

Peggy Sue Got Married

Peggy Sue Got Married, produced in 1986, is primarily about the woman's high school experience following Peggy Sue from the present back to her view of life in 1960. As a teenager she is seen as engrossed with her boy friend and peer group. Growing up at a time when the ultimate goal in life is marriage, she and her girlfriends spend a great deal of time talking about who they are going with, getting married and being close to each other. The film communicates the value of social learning above academics. With no aspirations of going on to college, Peggy Sue finds much of what is taught as useless. College is mainly for males and Peggy Sue even encourages her boyfriend to

attend.¹⁸

As an older woman going through a divorce from her high school sweetheart, finding herself in the past gives her an opportunity to once again look at the social aspects of her life that were so critical to her future. The need to give and receive love and a sense of belonging take on added significance. Being popular, Peggy Sue is in a very good position to enjoy her life and friends. The key ingredient, however, is having a boyfriend.

The film also shows the love between the various family members, including Peggy Sue's sister, mother and grandmother. What Peggy Sue realizes is that in the past communication between the various generations was often lacking. Only as an adult is she able to understand the importance of cross generational communication.

Wildcats

Wildcats, produced in 1986, is another look at the experience of a female coach in an area considered to be a

¹⁸Peggy Sue Got Married, 35 mm, 103 min., Tri-Star Pictures, Inc., Culver city, Calif., 1986. (For a discussion of the plot of Peggy Sue Got Married see Chapter 5.)

man's field. Molly McGraff is portrayed as a young, attractive, recently divorced mother of two girls who dreams of coaching a high school football team. She has always done what her ex-husband wants and feels trapped. What she really wants to do is visually portrayed as she poses in a football uniform for the school yearbook.¹⁹

The attitude of the men at Prescott, the middle class white high school where Molly teaches is decidedly negative against female coaches. Although she is shown to be highly qualified for the job, both the male principal and the head coach are decidedly against her becoming the football coach. The ridiculousness of their position is portrayed by having an unqualified, thin and weak looking male home economics teacher be given the job instead.

The male football team at Central High, the inner city school she is later sent to as coach, sees her only in terms of her gender. The players talk about her in sexual terms and appear before her naked to visually communicate the gender difference. Their verbal and nonverbal communication

¹⁹Wildcats, 35 mm, 107 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1986. (For a discussion of the plot of Wildcats see Chapter 6.)

defines the boundaries that exist between their two cultures--the male and female. Molly is able to bridge the gap because of a common subculture--football. She is portrayed as having grown up with a strong male figure, her father, and learned the attitudes, beliefs, and values of this world. Her ability to motivate the team is based on her understanding and being accepted into the high school football culture. In order to earn the respect of her players and establish the right to lead them she has to prove herself physically by challenging them to a race. Only by outlasting them does she earn their respect. This allows her to be seen in terms of her role as coach, rather than in terms of her gender. In this way she can more fully communicate with her team and they in turn are more receptive and listen to what she says.

In dress and manner Molly is close to her players. She wears mostly casual clothes--blue jeans and sweats. She plays music that they like and uses language that the players can relate to calling the players "pussies" to motivate them. She also understands that once the team starts winning this will further motivate them to learn. Education for them is an active participatory process

requiring concrete results. As the team wins the self-esteem of the team members increases. At the same time winning football games proves that Molly is a good football coach, which also nurtures her self-esteem. This linking between teacher and students is thus exemplified. Not only do the students learn from her, but she from them, proving that she can accomplish things on her own and in spite of all obstacles placed in her path. Just as Molly motivates the football players to succeed, they also motivate her to overcome the defeatist attitude that she has with regard to her ex-husband. Football thus helps Molly and her team cross the generation gap and unites them in a symbiotic learning relationship.

During the film she not only learns to handle the players on the team, but also her ex-husband. This, as she says to him, is important because she doesn't want to be a quitter any more and have her daughters see her as a quitter. Molly wants her daughters to believe all things are possible for a woman--even becoming a helicopter pilot as one of her daughters wishes.

The film shows that gender discrimination against women in education still exists. While there is no problem

with a male teaching in an area traditionally held by women like home economics, the idea of a female football coach is not considered appropriate. The high school is still under male control with the principals at both schools shown in the film being males. The attitudes of both the male coach at Prescott and the male members of Central High's football team are that football is a rough and dirty game that women are just not capable of handling. Football is supposed to be part of man's culture--a world filled with foul language and where physically hurting one's opponent is all part of the game. This is a world that is full of corruption and definitely not seen as a place for the more sensitive and delicate nature of women. Thus women are not given the opportunity to learn in certain areas because of male beliefs and attitudes. This in turn perpetuates the discrimination that women have in entering fields for which they might otherwise be qualified.

The one male who does not discriminate is the black high school principal. Being sensitive himself to the attitude that some minorities cannot do certain things, he looks at Molly as a minority and gives her the opportunity that she needs. Instead of making fun of her and trying to

destroy her self-esteem as the white coach does by telling her she's the joke of Chicago and is making high school sports look stupid, Central High's principal challenges her. He portrays a very positive attitude towards women and one which shows that women can accomplish a great deal if given the same opportunity as men.

Wildcats paints a very positive picture of women's experience by showing a woman who is able to not only communicate well with her students, but also with the opposite gender and across racial lines. It also portrays for the first time the teacher as a mother with a life and problems outside of the school setting. As a role model for her daughters, she represents someone who does not let her gender stand in the way of what she wants to accomplish.

Summer School

Summer School, produced in 1987, portrays a number of high school students who have difficulty passing an English skills test. Among the female students are Denise, a dyslexic, who also has a great deal of difficulty passing a driving test, Pam, a surfer who has trouble concentrating on anything else, Rhonda, an unwed pregnant teenager, and Anna

Marie, a beautiful Italian exchange student. What is important for all of them is good peer relationships.²⁰

Denise, a vibrant personality who lacks self-confidence is portrayed as unable to drive well enough to pass the driver's test. Once she is supported by her teacher, Mr. Shoop, and her peers, she is able to pass. The fact that she is dyslexic and has not been previously diagnosed as such is never explained. It is only when she feels confident enough to seek help from a fellow student that her problem is uncovered and tutoring provided.

While having one of the students be an unwed pregnant teenager opens up the opportunity to deal with this aspect of teenage life, there is little information given in the film on how Rhonda's pregnancy affects her life. Unlike other white teenagers she has her baby and gives it up for adoption. Her decision is based on her understanding that she is not yet ready to be a mother and what she is doing is in the best interests of the child. Although not much is known about her family, the fact that her mother comes to

²⁰Summer School, 35 mm, 95 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Summer School see Chapter 5.)

school and asks about the possibility of her daughter retaking the English skills test suggests that they are communicating well together.

Anna Marie is presented more as an audience for the two male students who are into horror films and effects. Since she enjoys their antics, what seems to be communicated is that unlike adults, teenagers are more accepting and understanding of the crazy actions of members of their own peer group. Also although she is dressed as very sexually appealing, no one tries to take advantage of her. The stress in the film is more on being liked by the opposite gender than on sexuality.

While Pam becomes attracted to her male teacher, Mr. Shoop, and begins to act like a wife, he sensitively directs her back to her peer group. The message relayed is that although teachers and students can communicate with each other and teachers can be counted on to help out as friends, a fine line between male teachers and their female students should be maintained. This is further emphasized when a fellow teacher, Miss Bishop, reminds Mr. Shoop that he is treading on dangerous water when he lets Pam stay with him temporarily.

As the only female teacher shown, Miss Bishop is presented as a bright and attractive young woman. It is she who provides Shoop with the help that he needs to become an English teacher giving practical advice that is appropriate for his students. Pairing her up with the stuffy and less amiable vice principal puts her in a position of also needing help. This is provided by Shoop who rescues her from an unfullfilling relationship.

Among other women shown in the film are a loving and caring grandmother of one of the male students and several other concerned mothers who appeal to the principal to keep Mr. Shoop after he has helped their children. The fact that they are willing to come to the school conveys a positive support system for their children. The only information mentioned about one mother is that she found about her son being a male stripper by attending the place that he worked. This is used for comic effect within the film and does not create a problem between the mother and her son.

Hiding Out

Hiding Out, produced in 1987, is another way of looking at the high school experience from an adult point of

view as the male hero, Andrew, disguises himself as a teenager named Maxwell. The female history teacher is portrayed as a bird of prey who will pounce on any student who disagrees with her. On her desk is a bronze statue of a falcon to symbolically communicate her personality. Her conservative dress with high necked blouse and pulled back hair make her look very austere. As a pro-Nixon supporter she is shown to twist historical facts and prevent anyone from disagreeing with her. By having Maxwell attack her ideas, she is made to represent the disliked ultra conservative authoritarian teacher who resists any student ideas or contact. Her negative image is further supported by having her tamper with the student election process in order to have the candidate that she favors for class president be elected.²¹

The other women in the film are more positively treated. Maxwell's aunt is a hard working and nice school nurse. His grandmother is also very warm and loving. Her importance as a substitute mother after his parents were

²¹Hiding Out, 35 mm, 98 min., DeLaurentis Entertainment Group, New York, New York, 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Hiding Out see Chapter 5.)

killed is underscored by having Maxwell think of sending her a birthday card, at a time when his own life is threatened.

Unlike many female students, Ryan is portrayed as down to earth and interested in going on to college. Having a very good relationship with her father also sets her apart. While she is also interested in good peer relationships and mistakes Maxwell for a teenager, she is capable of making the jump to communicating on a more adult level when she discovers who he really is. This makes it possible for their relationship to continue beyond high school.

Three O'Clock High

Three O'Clock High, produced in 1987, is another film with a male hero, Jerry, and focuses on the fight that is to take place at school. Three female students are shown as they relate to Jerry in the course of the day. His sister is a very outspoken supporter who functions as a helper. When he runs into problems during the fight she manages to give him the metal knuckles that Jerry's opponent is using thereby evening the odds for her brother.²²

²²Three O'Clock High, 35 mm, 95 min., Universal Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Three O'Clock High see Chapter 5.)

Jerry's girlfriend is presented as a weird looking person who hears voices and is in to the supernatural. Using the fight as an excuse to bond with him she unsuccessfully tries to seduce Jerry. Her portrayal is of someone who does not quite fit into any social group and is looking for a way to belong. In contrast is the new girl in school who looks and dresses attractively. She is portrayed as a kind of prize that might be available if Jerry proves that he is a worthy man by winning the fight he is challenged to.

An older conservative English teacher appears more as a plot device to set up a possible comparison of Jerry's fate in fighting the new school bully with the fate of Hector in The Iliad. As she recites passages from the book she communicates that proof of manhood in battle is something important in our culture and condoned by adults. At the same time her recital also presents how spectators view a battle--and the emotion it arouses.

A younger and less conservative English teacher, Miss Farmer, represents the weak and gullible woman who is sexually aroused by an outrageous book report by Jerry. Her changing her appearance, kissing Jerry and giving him her

telephone number make her appear like an idiot, rather than a respectable and mature adult. Since the film is a comedy the character's actions are meant to represent the power that men can have over women.

The only strong looking woman is Eva, the Dean of Discipline's secretary. Her character, however, is a stereotype of a German female officer. She is seen through Jerry's eyes as another adult who is keeping him prisoner in the school. None of the women in the film really represent the woman's experience. Most are used as stereotypes and plot devices. Only Jerry's sister is fairly realistic and used to portray a helper.

The Principal

The Principal, produced in 1987, is mainly a film that is concerned with the male experience in a largely black and poor urban school where drugs and violence are part of the fabric of life. Within the high school there is a lively drug business carried out by Treena. As an unwed mother who is presented as trying to bring up her son alone, she works for the main black gang leader. Her justification for what

she does is that she has to put food in her child's mouth.²³

Treena is an attractive, vivacious, and academically capable woman, caught in the trap of poverty knowing only one way of being able to survive. While being told by the new white principal that she should get a "real job," she is quick to point out that jobs for people like her are difficult to get and usually far from home. The quick fix solution to all her problems that is presented by the principal is for him to tutor her before school so that she can graduate. When he continues to try to help her after she sets him up for a beating, the film shows her beginning to respond to his help.²⁴

The other woman portrayed in the film is a Hispanic teacher named Miss Orozco. She is shown as strong, capable, caring, and attractive. She has good rapport with the students in her history class and spends extra time teaching a Hispanic student how to read. The film shows how vulnerable female teachers are in an environment where male

²³The Principal, 35 mm, 110 min., Tri-Star Pictures Inc., Culver City, Calif., 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of The Principal see Chapter 6.)

²⁴Ibid.

violence is commonplace. In criticizing one of the male students she opens herself to retaliation by rape. Despite what happens to Miss Orozco, her devotion to teaching is shown by her returning to her classroom.

Miss Orozco is one of the rare positive and fairly realistic portrayals of a woman high school teacher. She is not a super hero, but someone who seems genuinely concerned about her students. She functions particularly well with Hispanic students as illustrated by her helping Arturo with his reading. Unlike the excuse given by a teacher in another film regarding helping students to read, she does not see that her function is only in teaching history. As a Hispanic woman she portrays the importance of social relationships and family. In her teaching role she acts as a mother taking care of her children. She is capable of communicating well with other adults and students who can be reached.

Stand and Deliver

Stand and Deliver, produced in 1988, portrays several different aspects of a woman's high school experience. It shows a Hispanic woman in the role of the chairperson of the

math department. While the combination of ethnic minority, leader, woman and math is not usual and one might expect a fairly positive portrayal, Mrs. Ortega is seen as a very negative influence. While the school is faced with the possibility of losing its accreditation, she refuses to change the way that the math department tries to teach the students. Blaming the environment and lack of resources for the problems in the school she is seen as being backward thinking and not very creative. This coupled with her poor opinion of the capabilities of her students, makes her an obstacle in the way of any kind of educational change that would be of benefit to them.²⁵

While the students' families are presented as warm and loving towards their children and are shown as hard working, they also have a short sighted view of education. For Angel's grandmother it is a way for him to get a hot meal. For Ana and Claudia it is not necessary. Ana already has her life defined by her father working as a waitress in his restaurant and following in the steps of her mother and

²⁵Stand and Deliver, 35 mm, 105 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1988. (For a discussion of the plot of Stand and Deliver see Chapter 7.)

siblings. Claudia's knowledge is seen as a possible detriment to her getting a husband in a macho culture where women are not supposed to have as much education as a man.

What the film does show regarding female students is the absence of most stereotypical images of those who can succeed. Ana as shy, thin and wearing glasses is the only one who fits the image of an academically bright student. Claudia, who is pretty, popular with boys, and concerned about her looks, does not. Guadalupe also does not fit the image being fairly robust and motherly looking.

While the main character is a Hispanic male, his absence of a machismo attitude towards women is shown as having a positive effect. He tells Guadalupe that she is a top student and even goes to Ana's father to plead for her continued education. There is no indication that there is any gender discrimination towards the students. Making them all part of a team and working with them in a step by step fashion communicates that when treated equally women in math can be just as successful as the men. Thus in this film the overall treatment of female students is a strong positive one.

Some Kind of Wonderful

Some Kind of Wonderful, produced in 1987, focuses on teen relationships and like High School USA portrays the dilemma of a male student, Keith Nelson, who belongs to the outcast group, wanting to go out with a girl involved with the rich and popular crowd. The object of his affection is a beautiful girl named Amanda Jones, who comes from the same side of town as Keith, but who likes to be part of the more affluent life style of her friends. Despite the way she is treated by her wealthy boyfriend, Amanda clings to his group until Keith shows her that self respect is more important than being popular. While Amanda at first is presented as very superficial and using Keith, she is later shown as more sensitive as she reveals the reasons for running with the rich kids.²⁶

In contrast to Amanda is the tomboyish Watts who plays drums, dresses in black leather, and appears comfortable hanging out at the garage where Keith works. Unfortunately little background information is given as to why she does

²⁶Some Kind of Wonderful, 35 mm, 93 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Some Kind of Wonderful see Chapter 5.)

not like to go home and likes to be different than most girls her age. It is only in helping plan Keith's dream date with Amanda that her feminine side begins to emerge. She is the girl next door waiting for the boy next door to realize she exists as a woman.

Amanda's rich girlfriends are portrayed as snobs who have everything and discriminate against those who are not part of their social group. At issue is the concept of high school status and likability. While wealth is not the only ticket to acceptability in the high status popular group, conformity to its set of regulations regarding who one dates is required to maintain one's membership. The reason for being part of the group is the affirmation that one is liked. Those in the group thus are in a position to wield a great deal of social power as they decide who does or does not belong. The importance of this group is underscored when Keith's sister, Laura, brags to her friends about her brother being invited to a party by the head of the popular group and Amanda's former boyfriend, Hardy. This indicates a change in status not only for Keith, but also for herself. Even though she has friends that she likes, the importance of associating with the higher status group is too strong to

resist.

While portrayed as a warm and likeable person, Keith's mother is presented as another adult who has no idea of what is really happening with her children. Although her husband tries to push her son to go to college, she does not get involved. She lives in her own world, while her children live in theirs.

Student Confidential

Student Confidential, produced in 1987, portrays two bright and beautiful female students who are in need of counseling. Susan Bishop is shown in her room naked between satin sheets and surrounded by works of art and literature that communicate her preoccupation with her awakening sexuality. Unfortunately an accident has left a scar on her face that causes her to be shunned by her peers at a time when it is very important to be liked. The film offers a simple solution--changing her hair style and clothes so that attention is distracted away from her scar.²⁷

Like many teenagers she is very naive with regard to

²⁷Student Confidential, 35 mm, 92 min., Troma, New York, New York, 1987. (For a discussion of the plot of Student Confidential see Chapter 5.)

interacting with adult men and thus is placed in a situation of being easily taken advantage of. Although shown as responding to sexual advances, her refusing to be used by others dispels the idea that most teenage girls have loose morals. Her main concern is fitting in with her peers.

Elaine Duvat is also concerned with sexuality. In her case she desires to be a movie star. To accomplish her goal she believes using her physical attributes is more important than using her mental ability. Unlike Susan, she is more interested in the adult world than her own peer group. Like Coco in Fame, she is lured by fake promises of a film career. Her response to men is based on her mother's behavior so it is difficult for a man like the school counselor to help her. She is finally helped by Susan, who as a peer, can communicate to her that what she is doing is wrong.

The school counselor's secretary is shown as fairly young, warm and caring. Unlike many secretaries in high school films, she is presented as likeable and concerned about the effect that the school's counseling services will have on the lives of the students. She is not intimidated by the counselor who is supposed to be a genius type, nor by

the people that she has to deal with.

Johnny Be Good

Johnny Be Good, produced in 1988, portrays a mother and girlfriend who are supportive and necessary to help steer Johnny in the right direction. His mother, as a single parent, is shown raising three children and having her father live with them. Presenting a rare example of an extended family, the film conveys the nurturing nature of the mother and the cross generational communication that is possible. As a hard worker who is happy with what she does, she has a long term realistic outlook on life. Rather than having Johnny take advantage of the short term perks of money and sex that are offered by various colleges trying to recruit him to play football, she tries to communicate to him the importance of choosing a school which will provide him with a good education.²⁸

Georgia, as Johnny's girlfriend, is also very supportive, but is shown as refusing to compromise her standards. When she instructs him to be good, she lays down

²⁸Johnny Be Good, 35 mm, 86 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1988. (For a discussion of the plot of Johnny Be Good see Chapter 5.)

the guidelines for their relationship. Realizing the importance of a college education, she takes the side of his family regarding his future. Georgia is portrayed as a strong stable force for the more immature and gullible Johnny. She is capable of taking over the adult role of wife when the time comes.

Other women portrayed in the film are generally in the role of temptresses using their physical attributes to seduce Johnny and thereby make him become part of their corrupt world. They are in sharp contrast to the women who care about him. Since the film revolves around Johnny's experiences, there is no real insight into their own.

The Chocolate War

The Chocolate War, produced in 1989, focuses on the male student experience of Jerry in an all male Catholic school. The need for a woman's love and help are, however, presented by having a young beautiful girl talk to him at a bus stop and then later appear kissing him in his dreams. Added to this are visions throughout the film of Jerry's mother who has recently passed away. Images of her hugging him and watching him become increasingly important as he

struggles to deal with the pressures placed on him at his school. Since Jerry cannot communicate with his father, he is left to cope with his problems alone. What the film appears to be communicating is that while Jerry's mother is not there to help him in the flesh, she is in spirit. When he is manipulated into a fight, it is a vision of her disapproving that makes him realize what a mistake he has made. Like Brian in Taps, Jerry needs a mother's love and perspective to guide him.²⁹

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, produced in 1989, also revolves around the male experience. Bill and Ted are not shown as interacting with any female students and teachers. In the course of the film they meet two princesses that are brought back to help them with their band and be their mates. They also bring back Joan of Arc. She is not, however, representative of the woman's

²⁹The Chocolate War, 35 mm, 103 min., Sterling Inc., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of The Chocolate War see Chapter 8.)

experience.³⁰

The only other woman who is shown throughout the film is Bill's stepmother. As barely older than Bill and a former student at the same high school, she is more like a peer than a parent. Her function in the film is to help Bill in order for him to pass his history test and secure his future. She bridges the cross generational gap as peer and parent.

How I Got into College

How I Got into College, produced in 1989, presents the woman's experience from several points of view. One of the primary characters is Jessica Kailo, a beautiful teenager that manages to combine popularity and brains. Her goal is to be admitted to an Eastern university. While her friends worry about the SAT exams, she breezes through. Unlike most teenage characters she seems to lead a charmed life. Not only does she get along with her class mates, but she also comes from a large family with older sisters who have also

³⁰Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, 35 mm, 90 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure see Chapter 5.)

been academically inclined. Both of her parents are very supportive and she doesn't appear to have a care in the world. Growing up in a suburban world she is somewhat sheltered from reality. It is not until she goes for her college interview that she realizes that everything is not going to be easy for her.³¹

The film communicates that no matter how intelligent women are they are too emotional to deal with some situations. This is first shown by her inability to decide what shoes she should wear for her college interview. Rather than being secure in her mental ability, she focuses on outward appearances. Speaking to another female student, she begins to compare herself with others. What she thought made her special is fairly stereotypical of other successful students. For the first time she sees life from the standpoint of being ordinary and is unable to cope. Basing her perceptions on what she has been told by another student and letting her imagination cloud her reason, she completely misinterprets what is being communicated. This is where a

³¹How I Got into College, 35 mm, 98 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film corp., Los Angeles Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of How I Got into College see Chapter 5.)

male is needed to give a helping hand.

Vera Cook is also an intelligent student with aspirations for more education. As an outspoken gutsy personality she comes across as a strong person. Unlike Jessica, her abilities are hampered by a less than adequate education at an inner city high school and the financial inability of her single mother to help her. Hers is the plight of many African American women.

What both Jessica and Vera have are warm loving mothers who try to support their daughters. Although Jessica's father would rather she follow in his and her sisters' footsteps and go to the University of Michigan, she prefers to be different. It is her mother who goes along with her to her interview, backing up her right to choose. On the other hand Vera's mother does not encourage her daughter to apply to the same college when a recruiter, Nina, urges her to. Having experienced difficulties in life and not wanting her daughter to be disappointed if she is not admitted, her advice is to try a more viable route working and going to school at night. She represents the minority attitude that one should not soar too high lest one be shot down.

Several of Jessica's peers are also shown trying to get into college. Unlike her they are presented as fearful. One in particular is shown crying at several points in the film portraying the emotional female.

While the high school counselor is shown to be warm and encouraging, the help that she is able to give to the students appears to be limited. On the other hand the woman who passes herself off as a concerned college prep tutor is nothing more than a con artist out to get students' money. The only adult woman who appears as a very capable and concerned person is the college recruiter, Nina. As a minority recruiter she is shown to have a great deal of sensitivity to the needs of both males and females. She is very discerning and an active supporter of who she believes in. Able to communicate with both teenagers and adults, Nina is the right person for her job. While she is presented as strong and as capable as her boyfriend, who is also a recruiter, she continually encourages him to take the position of head of admissions, rather than going after the position herself. The film thus indirectly communicates that even women like her are meant to function as a support for their men.

Say Anything

Say Anything, produced in 1989, is a look at the woman's experience from the point of view of Diane Court a beautiful, caring and very bright student who has devoted her life to academic excellence. Having an open "say anything" communication relationship with her father gives the impression that she is a strong and independent person who is in full control of her life. The film, however, shows her as someone who has been deprived of strong peer relationships because of her studies and deceived by the very person that she has trusted in completely. Graduating from high school, she is basically alone. The solution to her problems is Lloyd, a strong caretaker type who introduces her to people that he knows.³²

Just as the academically bright Jessica Kailo in How I Got into College is shown to be unable to cope in certain situations and therefore needs a man to help her, so too Diane is shown as afraid of flying and needing Lloyd to go with her. Having chosen her father during her parents

³²Say Anything, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Say Anything see Chapter 5.)

divorce because of a need for security, she is shown doing the same with Lloyd when it is revealed that her father has lied to her about his business. She thus goes from one caretaker to another.

Two other female students, who are friends of Lloyd, are shown at several points in the film. One is Corey, a singer and song writer who has been betrayed by her boyfriend and spends a great deal of time venting her emotions by composing songs about their relationship. The emotionality and vulnerability of women is thus stressed. Both Corey and Lloyd's other female friend follow the progress that Lloyd makes in his relationship with Jessica. They give him pointers from a female perspective as they urge him to call Diane, try to understand what is happening to her sense of family and encourage him to be supportive of Diane's wishes. In an unusual presentation of peer relationships the film thus shows how friends of the opposite gender can help each other through frank and open discussions. Despite their helpfulness, it is Lloyd's natural nurturing ability that dominates the action.

The need for a strong man is communicated at the very beginning when Lloyd's sister is shown trying to cope with

raising her son alone. Later when Diane tries to talk to her mother it is apparent that she is not someone who really relates to her daughter. The film thus communicates that female teenagers need strong fathers or a peer substitute that will take care of them.

The Dead Poets Society

The Dead Poets Society, produced in 1989, is another private school experience which is also almost devoid of women. The two mothers briefly shown in the film are portrayed as weak and controlled by their husbands. There is no communication with their sons.³³

During the course of the film several female students from another school are shown. Those who come to the Dead Poets Society meeting are presented as fairly naive and not too bright. Only Chris, the student that Knox Overstreet falls in love with, has some depth. In a rigidly marked upper class society, she is shown to conform to general teen culture by going with a football player. Although she is seen as more intellectually inclined by going to a play

³³The Dead Poets Society, 35 mm, 124 min., Touchstone Pictures, New York, New York, 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of The Dead Poets Society see Chapter 8.)

without her boyfriend, there is not much information given about her character. Mainly she functions as the love interest of a member of the Dead Poets Society and is seen by him as something that is worthy of taking risks in life for, following the idea introduced by his teacher, Mr. Keating, "to seize the day."³⁴

Lean on Me

Lean on Me, produced in 1989, looks at several different types of women's experiences as it deals with problems in a poor black school that is filled with violence and drugs. Kaneesha is a student who is working towards finishing her high school education. As the only child of an unwed mother, she looks to the principal when she needs adult help in communicating with her mother. Despite the help and being aware of her mother's predicament in trying to bring her up alone and without welfare, she also becomes pregnant by the end of the film. While the film makes a comment about the problems of teenage girls having babies, there is never a solution presented. It is handled as an

³⁴Ibid.

accepted way of life that has no immediate closure.³⁵

Mrs. Carter, Kaneesha's mother, becomes an example of how difficult it is to cope with raising a child alone. She is shown poorly dressed in her dark shabby apartment. The depression that she feels is verbalized through the lyrics of a sad song that is being played at the start of the scene. Unlike fathers who can walk away from their parental responsibility, teenage mothers in the black community are locked into poverty with their children.

In contrast to Kaneesha is a Hispanic girl who is directed by the principal to use her outspoken verbal skills. Told that she should be a lawyer, she begins to move in that direction when she defends her principal against another outspoken adult. The film thus indirectly seems to indicate that while strong male support cannot help everyone, it can make a difference with some students.

The vice principal, Ms. Levias, is presented as a strong, caring and capable woman who works hard at her job and gets along with her colleagues. Called upon to assist

³⁵Lean on Me, 35 mm104 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Lean on Me see Chapter 7.)

the principal, Joe Clark, she is shown as being treated no better than a servant. Being able to stand up to Clark and finally telling him how terrible he is acting towards the adults shows that she is very concerned about what is going on and not afraid to speak up for the way the other adults in the school are being treated. Her staying at the school after her outburst is based upon a recognition that Clark, despite his tactics, is committed to what he is doing and is making a difference in the educational atmosphere of the school.

Unlike Ms. Levias, Leona Barrett, as the mother of one of the teenagers dismissed by Clark from the high school, is so enraged by his tactics that she works to destroy what he does by having him dismissed from his position. Rather than take any responsibility for her child, she is portrayed like other parents who blame the environment and the system for their children's behavior. Her dress and features present a cold and hard personality that takes advantage of a school crisis for personal gain rather than to really help the school provide a better education.

The film also portrays two different music teachers. The white teacher is shown as rigid and cold. She prepares

her students to sing Mozart--music that Clark believes has no practical value and is far removed from the experiences of the students. The black teacher on the other hand is portrayed as more relaxed and warm. She teaches her students to sing gospel music--something that is part of the African American experience. The difference in portrayal is designed to communicate that teachers of the same racial background are far more able to understand their students and adjust the material taught according to their experience and needs.

Heathers

Heathers, produced in 1989, is a look at the female side of wanting to be popular in high school. The tone of the film is set at the beginning with the song "Que Sera Sera" being played. As the lyrics communicate, girls are concerned with what they will be when they grow up--in particular if they will be pretty or rich. Physical beauty and money are highly valued because they are important factors for being included in the popular high school group. Since being popular is highly valued by American teenager culture those who are part of the popular group have a great

deal of power. The three Heathers in the film all fit the qualifications being pretty and rich. They decide who can become part of their group.³⁶

The Heathers dress in coordinated clothes based on the color of their choice, red, yellow and green. Their social life revolves around going to college parties, making out and getting drunk. They also have their own language and only mix with athletes and members of their group. Being concerned with appearances one of the Heathers is suffering from Bulimia. In the language of their peers they are the "megabitches" that run the school. They use and abuse their power because they have it.

Unlike the Heathers, Veronica is portrayed as a basically nice person. She joins the group because of the status that it has. As she tells another student she looks at it in terms of doing a job. In this case her job is being popular. Brighter than the others and having a talent that they can use, faking handwriting, she is accepted into the group. What is soon apparent, however, is that being

³⁶Heathers, 35 mm, 110 min., New World Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989. (For a discussion of the plot of Heathers see Chapter 5.)

popular is not something that makes one happy. The division of teenagers into various groups at the high school level socially segregates people who otherwise might be friends. Furthermore the actions of the more popular group are aimed to humiliate and use those who don't belong.

Two students who are outcasts from the Heathers' group are Betty Finn and Martha Dunnstock (Dumptruck). Betty is a less fashionably dressed teenager who wears glasses and was a former friend of Veronica's. Martha is overweight and dresses more like a boy. They are the kind of female teenagers that are often ignored and made fun of because of their looks. In the teenage world they are the victims of social segregation.

What the film communicates is the culture of teenagers and how the idea of equality does not really exist within its social structure. As in several other films there are a number of groups that differ from one another in terms of dress, language and values. Being popular is extremely important for teenage girls. Academic ability has nothing to do with the power structure. Looks and attitude are more important. Since teenagers value peer relationships and have a need to belong they are often victimized by their own

peer group.

The film is more like a fantasy in that the thoughts and dreams of the main character, Veronica are communicated directly to the audience. Being in a position to be humiliated by Heather Chandler, the most powerful of the Heathers, Veronica tries to find a way to stop her. While under normal circumstances the feelings of hate and revenge against someone who causes pain are played out in wishful thinking of ways to stop them, Heathers dramatically actualizes them in the course of the film.

The film allows Veronica to side step some of the responsibility for the death of the three teenagers that occur. Having a James Dean type character, Jason Dean, who is mentally unstable, urging and helping her, she protests that talking about killing someone doesn't mean a person actually wants to do it. At the end Veronica faces Jason Dean alone in an effort to stop him from killing all the students in the school. When he prepares to blow himself up, she does nothing to stop him. He is a motherless unloved child, a cross between Jim Stark and Plato in Blackboard Jungle. Having no one to turn to for affection, he has no function in society. Veronica is not able to love

him, because he has lost all sense of moral responsibility. Unlike other female teenagers she does not need anyone to lean on. At the end she befriends Martha Dumptruck and wears the red bow of the now deceased Heather Chandler which symbolizes power in the film. She thus communicates that women can help break the barriers that segregate peer groups. Being popular does not necessarily bring happiness.

Veronica's mother continues the trend of presenting parents who live in their own isolated world. Her interests have more to do with who Veronica is going to the prom with and the eating of food, than what is really happening to her daughter. Her father is the adult who acts like an idiot and has nothing meaningful to contribute. Without parental guidance Veronica is left to fend for herself.

In keeping with the negative image of adults is the portrayal of one of the teachers, Miss Fleming. While expressing concern over the supposed suicide of three high school students and the need to psychologically help other students cope, she urges the school to set up a special session where feelings can be expressed. Bringing in the media and trying to create a happening, she uses the suicides for her own personal benefit. Since the audience

already knows what really happened to the high school students, her believing the made up reasons for their deaths adds to the impression that the film is trying to make about how out of touch with the reality of teen life adults are. Instead of helping the students, Miss Fleming and other adults only popularize suicide through news stories and music. The result is making suicide the thing to do with the result that both a Heather and Martha Dumptruck almost become victims.

Heathers is perhaps a film that is a fitting end to the 1980s teenage experience. It contains the three main themes that mark the teenage genre. Belonging to a peer group is important. Teenagers have their own culture. There is a gap in cross generational communications.

Despite the greater variety of roles that women portray they are still shown as limited during the 1980s. The majority of main characters whether administrators, teachers, students or parents are male. There are no women principals at the high school level. The one woman superintendent and the one chairman of a math department are portrayed in a negative light. Of the women teachers portrayed some are seductresses, tempting young men, some

are cold and conservative and only a few are warm and caring. Several women teachers are African American and two are Hispanic. None of the minority teachers play a major role.

The only woman who stars in a film is a white coach teaching male students in an area normally dominated by men. Molly in Wildcats is warm and caring. She is a very good football coach who is able to handle her players and any problems on the field. In dealing with her personal life, however, she needs some help from men. When she gets into trouble with her ex-husband over the custody of her children, some of the players on her team try to help her out in court.

The female teachers like their male counterparts are almost all single. The English teacher in Fame is the only one that we are told has a husband. Molly is the only teacher shown to have children and be divorced.

Only a small number of female students are interested in academics. Even the bright students need male help to support and protect them. While Jessica Kailo is extremely qualified to be admitted to a top school, she becomes emotionally insecure during the interview process and has to

be guided by a less qualified male student to apply. Diane Court, while being selected as one of the brightest students in the world, needs a male escort to get over her fear of flying so she can attend college.

Almost all the students are more interested in peer relationships than academic achievement. In the segregated teen culture belonging to the popular group is important. Being rich, pretty or associated with the football or major sports team places one in the most popular and powerful group. Not only do peer groups provide a sense of belonging, but they also can be the main source of a great deal of informal learning.

The majority of main female student characters are portrayed as nice wholesome young women who are caring and vulnerable. Only a few are shown focused on short term sexual relationships. The rest are more involved in having more serious and long term relationships based on likability rather than sexuality.

A larger percentage of female students have mothers than their male counterparts. Like fathers, mothers are usually presented as nonexistent, away from home or too wrapped up in their own activities. Although many are

portrayed in a negative way, there are some who come across as concerned and caring--particularly the two black mothers, Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Carter who want their daughters to have a better life than they have had.

The inclusion of grandmothers and their close relationship with their grandchildren is something that differs from the 1950s. While Jim in Rebel without a Cause had a grandmother who was a negative controlling figure, all five grandmothers portrayed in the 1980s are supportive of their grandchildren and are able to communicate with them. In four films the grandmothers take the place of one or more parents who are no longer around.

While some of the adult women are viewed in a negative way, the majority of female students are not. With the exception of two of the Heathers and the one female member of Stegman's gang, the vast majority of female students are basically good types. Even Veronica in Heathers, who crosses the line of morality in helping kill some of the students, redeems herself at the very end.

The portrayal of the woman's experience, like that of the black and Hispanic, increases during the 1980s, particularly from 1986 to 1989. Women during this period

are portrayed as more academically inclined. At the same time, the importance of belonging to a peer group continues to stress informal learning as a key factor in the woman's experience.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

While the 1950s set the stage for the development of the "teenage education" genre as films were produced mainly for teenage audiences, the 1980s saw a flourishing of this genre as a large number of films about the teenage experience were produced. Like any genre, the films of the 1980s added to the plots and characters their own creations that were more reflective of the times. Their view of the high school experience, however, continued to focus on some of the same ideas and concerns.

Music was still an important part of teenage culture. While "rock 'n' roll" persisted, there was also the addition of rap music to express the thoughts and feelings of African-Americans. Instead of being the voice of rebellious youth, music began to be seen as a way to communicate across generational lines. Bruno in Fame wrote music that both his class mates and his father could enjoy. Mr. Shoop in Summer School wore T-shirts that proclaimed him an attender of rock

concerts. Bill and Ted were helped to complete their history report in Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure so that they could fulfill their future destiny and compose music that would appeal to everyone, bringing peace and harmony to the world.

There was proportionately less violence depicted, but when it was shown it was much more graphic and pervasive. West's gang members in Blackboard Jungle were angelic in comparison to the Stegman gang in Class of 1984. The ritual of the fist fight became more important in dealing with bullies than having a drag race, with only one race depicted in one film, High School USA,--but without tragic consequences.

Drug use continued to be presented, but it no longer was considered a major problem in most schools. Both white and black students used and sold drugs. Only three films associated drugs with violence. Class of 1984 presented a white gang selling drugs to a student who subsequently died as a result of his use. Lean on Me and The Principal showed inner city predominately black schools where there was constant gang warfare and drug dealing.

Smoking pot became more acceptable and used in social

situations with none of the extreme effects that were portrayed in The Cool and the Crazy. Spicoli was the happy and likeable pot head in Fast Times at Ridgemont High. The former hippie parents of Julie in Valley Girl smoked as a way of coping with life, but were still good and caring parents. The teenagers in Hollywood High, Part II smoked together as part of their sexual ritual. Even the teenagers in the affluent suburban high school in Breakfast Club shared a joint in school as they began to communicate with each other. Their resulting behavior was one of being more open and truthful that enabled them to more fully understand each other. The only stigma that smoking pot had in the teenage culture was seen in terms of habitual users who like Spicoli were portrayed as spaced out and not intellectually able. They were classified into a separate teenage group that had less status in the teenage culture.

The 1980s films were no longer under the censorship code that restricted sexual depiction as in the 1950s and premarital sex was no longer a taboo. Only a few films, however, like Hollywood High, Part II, Student Confidential, and Fast Times at Ridgemont High graphically presented teenage sex with women now taking the initiative. While sex

was still an important aspect of teenage life, the moral dilemma faced by teenagers in the 1950s no longer applied to couples in the 1980s. Sleeping together was seen as a natural part of the process of becoming a couple. Thus good girls like Diane Court in Say Anything and Lisa in All the Right Moves slept with their boyfriends. Sex was portrayed in a negative way when it was mainly used by males to satisfy their sexual urges, rather than as an expression of love and affection between two consenting individuals. The concerns of teenagers began to shift away from whether or not one should have sex, to finding someone that one was compatible with and having a satisfying long term relationship.

With the changing views on premarital sex and the legalization of abortion, the films of the 1980s were able to present teenagers who had abortions and show the plight of the unwed mother. Two white female students had abortions without their parent's knowledge and with no visible consequences. One white student gave her child up for adoption while two white students ended up marrying the father of their child because they were pregnant. Black teenage mothers were shown raising their babies alone. Only

Hispanic girls were not portrayed as either having sexual relations or getting pregnant.

Sex became linked with sports and the idea of natural selection. Since athletes were considered the most physically fit they were the desired mate choice of many of the teenage women. Being part of a football or basketball team and winning games thus was a way for men to become sexually desirable. Sex was seen as a reward for physical prowess.

Athletics also became important for status in the teenage culture. No matter how academically deficient or poor one was, being on a winning team meant recognition by one's peers and possible inclusion with the powerful and popular group in the high school. Pep rallies were important rituals which united all the students and gave the school a sense of community. In addition athletics, and in particular football, were presented as an important way for the poor and minorities to have the opportunity to move out of their environment by receiving a college scholarship.

Many more schools representing a wider variety of experiences and located in different parts of the country were portrayed. While the majority of schools were urban

and suburban public schools, three private schools were also presented. Like the 1950s, the majority of the schools focused on the white middle class experience. A few films included the experiences of Hispanic and African-American students. One school had a predominantly Hispanic population and several schools had predominantly African-American populations with some poor whites and Hispanics represented.¹

High schools were run by males. All the public high school principals were single men. While some were portrayed as strong, confident and in control of their schools, others were shown as weak and/or out of touch with what was happening. One white school had an African American principal. Of the three predominantly black schools that were focused on there was one white principal and two African-American ones. These principals were among the ones most positively portrayed and two were main

¹In 1985 one out of every twelve students were enrolled in a private school as reported in Department of Education, Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1995. (Bernan Press: Lanham, Maryland, 1995). 152; While white students in 1980 outnumbered black students six to one and Hispanics twelve to one according to Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1995 page 155, the proportion of white students presented in films during the 1980s was much greater.

characters--Joe Clark in Lean on Me and Rick Lattimore in The Principal.²

Both Joe Clark and Rick Lattimore were sent to predominantly black schools where drugs and violence were part of the every day existence of the students. They were both strong personalities who were not afraid to deal directly with the problems in the school and establish contact with the students. Waving bats they established strong security systems and began to take control of their schools. They were both chosen because they were mavericks who were asked to do a job that no one else wanted and because of their own particular strong and rebellious nature were able to succeed.

All the heads of the private schools were conservative males. The schools' authoritarian structure gave a great deal of power to those in control. Values like tradition and honor were extremely important and unlike the public schools the emphasis was on academics and future college

²About 50 percent of principals in the public school system were men with approximately 85 percent being white, 10 percent black and 3 percent Hispanic by 1993 according to Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Digest of Education Statistics 1995, 115th Edition. (Bernan Press: Lanham, Maryland, 1995), 94.

enrollment.

Of the other administrators focused on there were two positively portrayed vice principals, who were both women; the white, Mrs. Johnson in Tex and the African American Ms. Levias in Lean on Me. At the superintendent level there was a positively portrayed black male, Dr. Napier, who was shown in connection with a black school and the other a negatively portrayed white female, Miss Burke, shown in connection with a white school.

The majority of classroom teachers and all those who were main characters were also male. Only Mr. Norris in Class of 1984, the biology teacher in the same film, Mr. Escalante in Stand and Deliver, and the English teacher in Fame were shown as married. With the exception of the teachers who had starring roles and a handful of female teachers in supporting roles, almost all the teachers were portrayed in a negative light. They were dull, boring, opinionated, authoritative, corrupt and teaching subjects that were presented as having little to do with what is important in teenage life.³

³In 1981 two thirds of all public school teachers were women and 75 percent of all public school teachers were

Mr. Shoop, Jurel, Norris, and Keating had no real support for what they were doing from their administration. Even Mr. Escalante was not helped by the chairman of the math department. They all had to go out of their way to deal with the problems that they had in the classroom and try to motivate the students. What they all had in common is a respect for the students and a desire to teach.

Of the athletic coaches actually shown coaching, only one, Molly, was female. She was put in charge of an all male team and had to overcome the prejudices voiced by other male coaches. The depiction of coaches varied greatly from those who were well respected and helped the students succeed to those who were more interested in their own needs and corrupt. Two of the coaches had children, Nickerson in All the Right Moves and Molly in Wildcats.

The only counselor focused upon was Michael Drake in Student Confidential. Like the male teacher heroes he was presented as having to go out of his way to help his students. What made him succeed was also a real understanding of their needs and desire to help them.

married according to the Digest of Education Statistics 1995. 79.

The majority of films during the 1980s, as in the 1950s, focused on the male student experiences and had a greater proportion of males as the main characters. The majority of the students were ordinary individuals who found themselves in situations where they had to prove that they were capable or worthy of what they wanted. Three male students were into computers, four were scientifically bright, several were athletes, a few were into the arts and the rest ranged from the whites and blacks who controlled the school to the geeks, nerds, pot heads and assorted outcasts.⁴

Most of the male students heroes were motherless only children or came from families where the parents were not around or with whom there was little or no communication. Three males were presented as being raised by their grandmothers. Female students in comparison tended to have either mothers or both parents present at home. A few students had siblings.

The main concern of the majority of students was with

⁴From 1980 to 1989 female students made up approximately 50 percent of the public school population according to the Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1995. 155.

having good peer relationships. Informal learning, rather than formal learning, had a greater impact on their lives. Living in their own teenage culture with its prescribed language, mode of dress, and patterns of behavior gave them a sense of belonging while isolating them from the adult world around them. The teenage world was shown as a very segregated one with people placed into various groups according to their family backgrounds, ways of dress, mental ability, athletic ability, drug use, etc. Being liked and belonging to a group were important factors in a teenager's life.

The majority of female student characters were presented as concerned with establishing good relationships with the opposite gender. While several were brighter than the males who pursued them, they were portrayed as needing male support in their lives. Diane Court and Jessica Kailo needed a man to help them get to college. Veronica needed a man's assistance to change the power structure in her school.

While the majority of students were also white, a growing number of male and female black students and some Hispanic began to appear in films. The black students

portrayed in predominantly white films were basically good and either equal to the students around or in two instances more intelligent. While one student excelled in science, the other student was a computer whiz. Hispanic students were mainly depicted in poor environments and going to school with black students. They were not depicted as being violent or on drugs, but rather were cooperative students who usually respected the teachers and got along with their relatives. Although a few Asian students were seen occasionally in some of the films, only a group of geek looking stereotyped male students who were attending a college fair in How I Got into College spoke to make a point that they were bright and academically oriented.

Parents still tended to be mainly portrayed in a negative way or have passed away. They ranged from being out of town or out of the country, abusive, uncaring, too involved in their own life to know what was happening in their children's, idiotic, and controlling. Tex and his brother in Tex were motherless and their father had abandoned them. Montgomery in Fame was fatherless and had an actress mother that was always away. Ralph's father was in prison for beating his sister and his mother was sleeping

with different men. Clifford in My Bodyguard was motherless and Linderman had a father who was only concerned with watching television. None of the students in The Breakfast Club got along with their parents. The motherless Lucas had an alcoholic father. Cameron's parents in Ferris Bueller's Day Off loved things more than their son. Watts in Some Kind of Wonderful, Jay Jay in High School USA and Jerry in Three O'Clock High had parents who were away. Archie's father in High School USA and Veronica's parents in Heathers were presented as idiots. Neil's father in The Dead Poets Society and Brian's father in Taps were presented as cold and authoritative.

There were some parents, however, who were concerned about their children and tried to support them whenever possible. While motherless, both Clifford in My Bodyguard and Stef in All the Right Moves had loving fathers. The fatherless Johnny in Johnny Be Good and Joseph Williams in Student Confidential had caring mothers. Julie in Valley Girl had loving parents and all the main character students in Summer School had at least one parent or grandmother who were concerned about them. Students with a good loving parent or relative tended to have a better chance of coping

with the problems in their life.

Students who needed a strong father figure often turned to peers, teachers and administrators for guidance. For male students, female students often functioned as substitute mothers. Just as in the 1950s, the films of the 1980s showed the importance of parents and family and how students tried to cope with the problems in their life by finding substitutes whenever possible. The success or failure of cross generational communications was still an important theme. For those who failed, like Neil in The Dead Poets Society and Brian in Taps, the results could be tragic.

While peer relationships were used as a substitute for the lack of cross generational communication, the need for the students to establish long term commitments with the opposite gender suggests that what was being communicated is the teenage need to establish their own world of belonging. What the teenage films stress is that the high school years are a time when social learning becomes extremely important. The world of the teenager is defined by the teenage culture within one's school and the subgroup that one belongs too. While some students communicate well and have loving

parents, the majority do not. This makes acceptance into a group and having a possible mate even more important.

While some students look at high school as a means of providing them educational opportunity that will enable them to go on to college and have a better life, most are more preoccupied with being accepted and liked by others.

Teenagers tend to view the subjects taught in school as having no relationship with their needs and of being useless in the future. Schools are sometimes regarded as prisons for the temporary containment of their teenage students.

Few teachers have a passion to teach. Those that do are not well supported by the system and have to be concerned with understanding and caring about their students, as well as, the subject that they teach. Not only teachers, but students and their parents as well, need to take a more active interest in education if the students are to be successful. While not all students may be motivated to learn, the institution is responsible for trying.

Some of the educational questions raised by the films include:

1. What can and should principals do to insure that schools are safe and that disciplinary problems are adequately

handled?

2. If more time is taken by teachers and administrators to know students and their problems will this increase the communication between them and facilitate learning?

3. Should schools have to teach all the students that they have, when a few are not only disruptive, but drain the resources that might otherwise be available to those who want to learn?

4. How important is environment in the learning process? If it is important then what can be done to facilitate learning?

5. Should the school be involved in dealing with the problem of unwed mothers? If so then in what way can it help?

6. What can the high school do to make the material that it is teaching more relevant to the lives of the students?

7. How can poor female teenagers with no athletic ability find the same opportunity to go to college that is provided to male athletes?

8. How accurately is the high school experience portrayed? In what ways does it differ from reality and why?

9. How important are parents in the educational process

and what should be done to increase their involvement?

10. How can both parents and the school become more sensitive to the needs of the students and communicate better with them?

APPENDIX A

FILMOGRAPHY

APPENDIX A

FILMOGRAPHY

- All the Right Moves, 35 mm, 91 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1983.
- Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, 35 mm, 90 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.
- Blackboard Jungle, 35 mm, 101 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., Santa Monica, Calif., 1955.
- Breakfast Club, The, 35 mm, 100 min., Universal Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1985.
- Chocolate War, The, 35 mm, 103 min., Sterling Inc., Los Angeles, 1989.
- Class of 1984, 35 mm, 93 min., United Film Distribution, Canada, 1982.
- Cool and the Crazy, The, 35 mm, 78 min., American-International, Los Angeles, Calif., 1958.
- Dead Poets Society, The, 35 mm, 124 min., Touchstone Pictures, New York, New York, 1989.
- Explosive Generation, 35 mm, 100 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1961.
- Fame, 35 mm, 130 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., Santa Monica, Calif., 1980.
- Fast Times at Ridgemont High, 35 mm, 92 min., Universal City Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1982.
- Ferris Bueller's Day Off, 35 mm, 104 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1986.

- Heathers, 35 mm, 110 min., New World Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.
- Hiding Out, 35 mm, 98 min., DeLaurentis Entertainment Group, New York, New York, 1987.
- High School Caesar, 35 mm, 70 min., Film Group, North Hollywood, Calif., 1960.
- High School Confidential, 35 mm, 85 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., Santa Monica, Calif., 1958.
- High School Hellcats, 35 mm, 68 min., American-International, Los Angeles, Calif., 1958.
- High School USA, 35 mm, 96 min., Doron Productions Ltd., Calif., 1983.
- Hollywood High, Part II, 35 mm, 86 min., Lone Star International Pictures Inc., West Hollywood, Calif., 1981.
- How I Got into College, 35 mm, 98 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.
- Johnny Be Good, 35 mm, 86 min., Orion Pictures, Los Angeles, Calif., 1988.
- Lean on Me, 35 mm, 104 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1989.
- Lucas, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1986.
- My Bodyguard, 35 mm, 96 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1980.
- Peggy Sue Got Married, 35 mm, 103 min., Tri-Star Pictures Inc., Culver City, Calif., 1986.
- Principal, The, 35 mm, 110 min., Tri-Star Pictures Inc., Culver City, Calif., 1987.

- Rebel Without a Cause, 35 mm, 111 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1955.
- Say Anything, 35 mm, 100 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1989.
- Some Kind of Wonderful, 35 mm, 93 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987.
- Stand and Deliver, 35 mm, 105 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1988.
- Student Confidential, 35 mm, 92 min., Troma, New York, New York, 1987.
- Summer School, 35 mm, 95 min., Paramount Pictures Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., 1987.
- Taps, 35 mm, 118 min., Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., Los Angeles, Calif., 1981.
- Teachers, 35 mm, 106 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1984.
- Tex, 35 mm, 106 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1982.
- Three O'Clock High, 35 mm, 95 min., Universal Studios, Universal City, Calif., 1987.
- Valley Girl, 35 mm, 95 min., Atlantic Film Group Inc., Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, 1983.
- Wargames, 35 mm, 114 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/Universal Artists, Santa Monica, Calif., 1983.
- Wildcats, 35 mm, 107 min., Warner Brothers Inc., Burbank, Calif., 1986.

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VITA

The author, Maria Moraites, is the daughter of Efstratios Panayiotis Moraites and Parthenope (Pettou) Moraites. She was born on March 3, 1940 in Chicago, Illinois.

Her elementary education was obtained in the public Marquette Elementary School and private St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox School in Chicago, Illinois and in the public school in Polyhnikos, Mytilini, Greece. Her secondary education was completed in 1957 at Senn High School, Chicago, Illinois.

In September, 1957, Ms. Moraites entered Northwestern University, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Science in speech in June 1961 and the degree of Master of Arts in speech in August of 1961. Post Masters work included: University of Chicago (French), London College of Law and Languages (Italian), Northeastern Illinois University

(education), University of Illinois, Circle Campus (visual anthropology), Northwestern University (education, anthropology, television).

While still attending Northwestern University in 1961 Ms. Moraites won a film scholarship from the Chicago Producers' Guild enabling her to make the film, Good Night Socrates in 1962 (first place winner at Venice Documentary Film Festival). This was followed by a series of films including: Felipe, Gypsy from Triana in 1964, Maxwell Street in 1971, Chicago's Picasso in 1972 (2nd place winner at Chicago International Film Festival), A Nice Place to Live in 1974 (funded by the national Science Foundation), and Images of Women in American Art in 1978 (funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts).

Ms. Moraites worked as a film writer, producer, director and camerawoman from 1961 until 1990. She taught communications for the University of Maryland in Spain and England from 1962 to 1963, English at Pitmann's College in 1963, elementary school and English classes for the foreign born for the Chicago Board of Education from 1966 to 1967, and produced and taught courses in film, television and communications for Northeastern Illinois University from

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