



The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies

Volume 74
Number 2 *Volume 74 No. 2 (2013)*


Article 7

June 2013

The Attack on Social Studies Teachers and Teaching in 1970s and 1980s Hollywood Movies

Robert Dahlgren
State University of New York at Fredonia

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#)

Illinois Council of Social Studies

Recommended Citation

Dahlgren, Robert (2013) "The Attack on Social Studies Teachers and Teaching in 1970s and 1980s Hollywood Movies," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 74: No. 2, Article 7.
Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol74/iss2/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Illinois Council of Social Studies



The Attack on Social Studies Teachers and Teaching in 1970s and 1980s Hollywood Movies

Robert L. Dahlgren
State University of New York at Fredonia

Introduction

In Peter Bogdanovich's classic *The Last Picture Show* (1970), an early classroom scene foreshadows the depressing tableau of rural, small town Texas ennui that follows. A high school teacher is perched casually upon his desk, engrossed in a heavy volume, juvenile chaos surrounding him: two male students play-fight with one another, while another male student launches a wad of paper across the room and a female student adjusts her make-up in a compact mirror. Finally roused from his book by the increasing noise in the classroom, the teacher addresses the group with an opening remark dripping in irony: "Well, I wonder what my chances are this morning of interesting you kids in the work of John Keats?" Without missing a beat, a student named Duane shoots back, "None at all." The teacher chuckles along at Duane's retort as the rest of the class laughs heartily.

In this brief but memorable scene, one finds the dominant framework for viewing public education and social studies teaching in the early 1970s: out of control classrooms filled with ignorant students bored to tears with the outdated and irrelevant curriculum presented by teachers jaded by their own tenured status and luxuriously idle summer vacations, merely riding out the last few years of their careers until a cozy retirement. This narrative of schools in crisis was tied to a sense of malaise within American society, due to a catalog of blows to the sense of American democracy and empire, including the humiliating military defeat in Vietnam, 1973 OPEC oil crisis, the Watergate scandal, economic stagflation and the Iranian hostage standoff at the end of the decade. In his work on the post-war history of Buffalo, New York, Mark Goldman (2007) described "A Decade of Loss:"

The years measured hard times, even for the big and glamorous cities, places like New York and Boston. Times were harder still for the dark and dirty rust belt cities of the industrial heartland—Cleveland and Pittsburgh, Youngstown and Buffalo. With their industries eroded by foreign competition and undermined by disinvestments and mismanagement, these once great cities stared at a gloomy and uncertain future." (p. 255)

The popular culture, and especially Hollywood films, of the 1970s and 1980s echoed and reinforced in the minds of millions of Americans the fear that American society and its schools had seen better days.

A dramatic shift in the public image of teachers has occurred over the past generation. Beginning in the 1970s, public school teachers, once venerated for their service to their communities, were routinely portrayed as villains in the media and in popular entertainment.



Producers and writers of some of the country's most popular film and television entertainment spun tales of teenagers rebelling against schools in crisis. These popular cultural images reinforced the efforts of educational policymaking elites in a campaign that culminated in the publication of the seminal *A Nation at Risk* report (CEE, 1983) that has plotted the course of public education policy for the past thirty years.

School-based films came to play a significant role in forming the nascent political inclinations of its viewers. In his discussion of the influence of 1980s popular culture, David Sirota (2011) commented:

In part because of what we learned three decades ago, eighties-kids-turned-twenty-first-century adults are more prone to accept or support passionate Tea Party, talk radio, and cable-news screeds against the very concept of government - screeds that, not coincidentally, evoke the questions and imagery still lingering from the 1980s. (pp. 92-93)

Thomas Frank (2001) described the 68 percent of "Gen-Xers" raised in the 1980s that he surveyed as "market populists:" "Their fundamental faith was a simple one. The market and the people were essentially one and the same. By its very nature, the market was democratic, perfectly expressing the popular will through the machinery of supply and demand, poll and focus group, superstore and Internet" (p. 21). These "Eighties-kids," fed a constant diet of negative images of public education, have in turn supported the bipartisan consensus on market-based school reform centered on belt-tightening budgets and standardized test-focused accountability measures.

Hollywood provided the crucial visual arsenal of images of crumbling, graffiti-strewn public school buildings, elitist and incompetent tweed-jacketed teachers encamped in tony faculty lounges and ignorant slacker students, stumbling into class late trailed by a plume of marijuana smoke. As a common benchmark for student cultural knowledge, social studies instruction faced a withering attack in these films, buttressing common stereotypes of social studies teachers as uniformly stern, uncaring pedants obsessed with the sound of their own voices, droning on about esoteric topics in front of classrooms full of slack-jawed students.

In the following article, I will investigate the ways in which popular entertainment, through the sheer repetition of powerful visual images, can reinforce political agendas even in the absence of empirical data to support them. As the result of a survey of 40 films, I will argue that Hollywood film and television products have been crucial in presenting an image of American education in crisis. Finally, I will compare the mythological images included in these films with the contemporaneous scholarship. The crisis paradigm that emerged from this period has led to the dominance of market-based reforms in education and the subsequent narrowing of the curriculum to a set of essential skills presumed to be necessary in the 21st century workplace, often at the expense of the arts, music and social studies. By effectively challenging this narrative, a critical theoretical analysis can provide a step forward toward a more authentic and progressive pedagogy in social studies instruction focused on preparing students to be democratic citizen-actors.



Education and the Popular Culture Narratives

Sociologists and cultural historians have long understood the power that popular narratives exert over the processes with which people make meaning of their everyday experiences, often threatening to supersede actual lived experience. Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings (1991) noted, “The stories we hear and the stories we tell shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture. Stories and narratives, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives” (p. 1).

In the 20th century, few forms of popular culture narratives captured the imagination of the American public in the manner of Hollywood films. Carl Plantinga (2009) noted the ability of movies to make an emotional impact on audiences that allows their images to resonate in the mind long after the initial viewing. He commented, “Strong emotions have a tendency to make a mark, leaving lasting impressions that transform our psyches and imprint our memories” (p. 2). Filmed and other visual images, especially those marketed to mass audiences, are so vivid in the minds of Americans that it almost seems as if viewers have had identical experiences to those depicted onscreen even if they have not.

In their work on the use of historical film in social studies classrooms, Alan S. Marcus, Scott A. Metzger, Richard J. Paxton and Jeremy D. Stoddard (2010) testified to the influence of film in the ways in which history is interpreted within the broad society. They stated, “There seems little doubt that movies are among the most powerful art forms developed in the twentieth century, with considerable influence over many forms of thought, including historical” (p. 7). History teachers note with chagrin that their students will often derive much of their knowledge of historical events from Hollywood blockbusters, which can present either overly dramatic or even deliberately fictionalized narratives within the framework of the events.

In the late 20th century, Hollywood became increasingly fascinated with lives of American teenagers, and particularly their experiences in school. Timothy Shary (2002) explained that, “youth have disposable incomes that they enjoy spending on entertainment; today’s children become consumptive parents of tomorrow; filmmakers engage in the vicarious experiences of their own lost youth” (p. 1). This concentration on school life is thus largely due to the creation of the teenage film genre in order to capitalize on the suburban American teenage demographic. Jonathan Bernstein (1995) recalled that, “This was the time when the spawn of the boomers had pockets bulging with pocket money, and they were happy to lavish that coinage on all manner of electronic babysitter, from Pac-man to Pong to *Porky’s*” (p. 4). In an effort to flatter this niche audience, filmmakers of the period flooded multiplexes with movies that centered on the institution that dominated their lives—the high school.

This era also corresponded with a technological shift that included the introduction of home video recording devices in the early 1980s and the launch of Music Television (MTV) in the summer of 1981. This quantum leap in technology allowed teenagers to endlessly replay their



favorite movies from the era. In addition, the corporate mergers within the entertainment industry during the 1980s meant that fans of *The Breakfast Club* (1985) could now re-live the movie in all of its Judd Nelson fist-pumping glory once an hour on MTV. This immediate and repetitious exposure to teen-oriented movies from the 1970s and 1980s elevated the stature of even the most marginally popular of the voluminous Hollywood output.

Due to the increased importance of the teenage film-going market to both motion picture production companies and advertisers, Hollywood films have thus become an increasingly important prism for viewing and framing a variety of cultural issues related to American public education. Timothy Shary (2002) argues: “The school film is perhaps the most easily definable subgenre of youth films, since its main plot actions focus on the setting of high school or junior high school campuses” (p. 26). Indeed, by the mid-1980s, suburban multiplex screens were inundated with stories of geeks, jocks, cheerleaders, freaks, stoners and other Hollywood high school archetypes.

While these films are often categorized as youth culture, Simon Frith (1981) noted that the majority of popular culture products are in reality created by adults who are decades older than their target audiences. Thus, in the case of school-based films, the perspectives of the writers and directors reflect a lived experience that is a generation removed from the lives depicted onscreen. This dated perspective is exemplified by the vogue in the 1970s for movies that cast a nostalgic eye over the 1950s and early 1960s, an era that many of the filmmakers including Peter Bogdanovich (*The Last Picture Show*), George Lucas (*American Graffiti*), and Randal Kleiser (*Grease*) experienced first-hand.

In the following sections, I report the findings of a textual analysis of 40 feature films, exploring the ways in which Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1980s depicted social studies teachers and instruction in American public schools by looking at four broad categories: the conditions of schools and social studies classrooms, classroom management practices employed by social studies teachers, instructional practices employed by social studies teachers, and the interactions between social studies teachers and their students. Embedded within these four broad categories is a misleading but devastating critique of American schooling and social studies practice.

The “Crisis” in America’s Public Schools

The view that America’s schools were in crisis was reinforced throughout the 1970s and 1980s by a flood of images of decrepit, chaotic, and dangerous schools in Hollywood films. One of the most common opening credit sequences is the long, slow establishing pan shot over a crumbling school building surrounded by chain-link fences topped with barbed wire and festooned with toilet paper and graffiti. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), for instance, depicts the suburban Ridgemont High School in typically anarchic fashion on the opening day of the school year, with one student energetically lobbing a roll of toilet paper at the school building, while



another student has been wrapped in tissue from head to toe in the style of a mummy. A male student grabs a book from the hand of a female student and runs away with it while she chases him. A group of bullies surreptitiously tapes a sign reading, “I am a homo,” to the back of another male student.

When it comes to portraying life in inner-city public schools, the perceived dangers are more pervasive and deadly. Students in these films of Hollywood’s imagination are shown literally walking a gauntlet of threats from gang members, drug dealers and other criminal elements operating with impunity within the walls of America’s public schools. In *Fame* (1980), for example, a music student in a prestigious New York City arts academy points out the merits of attending the school to a fellow student who is unsure that he has chosen the right place to study: “Listen, it’s better than regular school,” he points out. “It’s free and you don’t get raped in the hallways.” The assumption in this casual, throwaway remark is that students in average public schools have to contend with routine acts of extreme sexual violence as they navigate their ways through an ordinary day of academics.

Lean On Me (1989)—a film loosely based on the career of notorious Paterson, New Jersey, principal Joseph “Crazy Joe” Clark—begins with a fascinating juxtaposition between a dashiki-clad Clark in an idyllic 1960s era classroom and the same school twenty years later. In its 1980s incarnation, Eastside High features hallways defaced with gang-affiliated graffiti. In an opening sequence, students are portrayed wandering aimlessly in the hallways, while a fight breaks out over a seemingly innocuous incident between two students. Under a soundtrack of the Guns & Roses song “Welcome to the Jungle,” two leather-jacketed thugs harass a teacher dressed in a suit and bow tie. Finally, the scene reaches its crescendo as the school’s principal is beaten to death while attempting to stop another fight. The scene ends on a poignant note with a student trapped inside of a locker plaintively crying out, “Somebody help!”

In many 1980s films set in urban communities, the main characters have only chosen to work at their schools under duress after having been passed over for what they perceive are better positions at their suburban schools. In the Goldie Hawn comedy *Wildcats* (1986), the protagonist grudgingly accepts a coaching job at a nearby inner-city school. Driving through a Southside Chicago neighborhood in her white Volkswagen van past obligatory scenes of African American drug dealers loitering on street corners to her new job at Central High, her face registers second thoughts. As she arrives at the school, a crumbling institution surrounded on all sides by chain-link fence and covered in graffiti, she is alarmed to see two threatening men sitting on their car drinking beer. Undeterred, she enters the dark and empty hallways of the building, whereupon two Dobermans attack and chase her from the school.

Teachers and administrators in these films are routinely portrayed as oblivious to the pandemonium surrounding them. The 1984 film *Teachers* begins with what the audience is meant to believe is an ordinary day in the life of a typical urban neighborhood high school in Columbus, Ohio. A security officer marches a student who is visibly bleeding through the school’s administrative office. When the vice principal, Mr. Rubell, asks what has happened to the student,



the officer nonchalantly states “stab wound.” Rubell then asks a secretary to call for an ambulance, at which point the student stammers that he doesn’t require one. “It’s not for you; it’s for the insurance company,” Rubell responds sardonically.

The message of these scenes to American parents is unmistakable: public schools are dangerous places to send their children to be educated. This is frequently underscored by the use of harrowing, newsreel style narrations and textual crawls over the opening credits of films, featuring frightening statistics about school violence. For example, in the school-based horror film *The Class of 1984*, an opening card reads:

Last year there were 280,000 incidents of violence by students against their teachers and classmates in our high schools. Unfortunately, this film is partially based on true events. Fortunately, very few schools are like Lincoln High...yet.

This use of statistics would suggest that these filmmakers were attempting to enter a more serious dialogue about the state of schooling; however, their exaggerated visual styles undercut this effort.

Other filmmakers deliberately chose to transcend reality, favoring hyperbole for the sake of humor. In the most cartoonish representation of the out of control American public school, *Class of Nuke’em High* (1986) focuses on Tromaville High School, a New Jersey public high school located less than a mile from a nuclear power plant that has gone into melt-down mode. As the result of the contamination of the school by nuclear waste, shown as a thick green slime insinuating itself through the walls of the school’s feeble structure, the school’s “honor students” have metamorphosed into a knife-wielding “vicious gang of cretins.”

In all of these examples, public high schools are portrayed as teetering on the brink of destruction. Not surprisingly then, the classroom management methods used by social studies teachers to maintain a modicum of student discipline are shown to be uniformly futile.

Classroom Management in Hollywood Schools

In Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1980s, teachers are shown lackadaisically arriving at the school either alongside the students, casually joking with them as they make their way through the overcrowded hallways to their classrooms, or, indeed, after the students, screeching into school parking lots in worn-out jalopies after the last attendance bell has sounded. In *Teachers* (1984), an administrator asks a secretary if Mr. Jurel—the film’s protagonist—has arrived. The secretary looks cross-eyed at the thought before adding, “On a Monday?” Later in the same scene, the secretary phones a visibly hung-over Jurel to ask him sarcastically if he is going to be teaching that day or rather taking “one of your famous three-day weekends.”

In *The Class of 1984*, a first year teacher wanders aimlessly into his classroom on what is the first day of his teaching career as the last attendance bell rings and is horrified to find a group of



unruly students punching one another and playing with a variety of weapons. He eventually attempts to restore order pleading, “Alright, everybody. Settle down. Would you sit down, please...?” Instead of paying attention, the students begin a sinister, ritualistic chant of “Teacher, teacher, teacher....” Veteran educators who are accustomed to a mandated week of pre-school year preparation will doubtless find these scenes especially absurd.

Similarly, the kinds of classroom management techniques that are a central part of any teacher preparation program are entirely absent from the social studies classes of 1970s and 1980s Hollywood’s imagination. Classrooms are uniformly arranged in spirit-crushing rows of crippling wooden desks bolted to the floor. Not a single alternative classroom arrangement (e.g., horseshoes, semi-circles, clusters) is depicted in these movies. This kind of traditional classroom arrangement makes effective disciplining especially difficult as those students who are not intrinsically motivated to learn will simply gravitate toward the most remote corners of the room in order to escape their teachers’ attentions. In the revenge drama *My Bodyguard* (1982), a five-minute scene details the beginning of the year procedures in one class, displaying the teacher’s inability to master a task as simple as student seating arrangement. In the scene, the teacher attempts to gain the attention of the boisterous class by first introducing herself while several students are sitting on the tops of their desks and another is sailing a paper airplane at a friend. She then says, “Hello—would you please find a seat” in a loud voice before giving up on the introductions altogether.

As a result of this inadequate planning, social studies teachers in 1970s and 1980s films are uniformly severe in responding to student misbehavior. In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), a U. S. history teacher named Mr. Hand is shown reviewing a particularly pedantic list of pet peeves on the first day of his class. He barks at his students: “I have but one question for you: can you attend my class? It is for your own good and if you can’t make it, I *can* make you.” Meanwhile, a tardy student is shown meandering down a long hallway looking for Mr. Hand’s class. In the eventual confrontation that transpires, Mr. Hand takes valuable class time to challenge the student with the sarcastic quip, “I get so lonely when I hear that third attendance bell and all of my kids aren’t here.” The student is left with his registration card in tatters heading back to the administrative office.

This kind of hostility displayed by social studies teachers toward their students is assumed by the filmmakers to be a rather mundane, everyday occurrence. Even implicit threats of violence go unchallenged within the main narratives of these films. In *Cooley High* (1975) history teacher Mr. Mason stops a student who is entering his classroom and demands that he remove his sunglasses. When the student resists, Mason yells at him, “Man, you can pull that bad act out on the street, but you don’t move me. You take off those shades before I bounce you off those hall lockers.” The profusion of images of dictatorial social studies teachers in these films acts to connect the mistreatment of students to a subject matter often ridiculed as tedious and irrelevant to students’ lives.

In other words, students in 1970s and 1980s movies first had to dodge physical threats inside and outside their schools before finally arriving at the doors of social studies classrooms



presided over by content-driven tyrants who had long since lost any capacity for empathy toward their students. These themes echo in the many scenes involving social studies instruction in Hollywood films of the period.

Instructional Practices in Hollywood's Imagination

These depressing narratives regarding American schooling and teaching in 1970s and 1980s movies are reinforced by scenes of unrelentingly tedious lectures on remote content material delivered by social studies teachers. One of the most consistent tropes in school-based films is the un-prepared social studies teacher relying upon outdated textbooks and yellowed notes standing behind a podium while lecturing on an arcane topic before a group of visibly bored students. In the forty feature films reviewed for this project, direct instruction is by far the most common instructional method presented. Few of the films show teachers engaging their students in the numerous cooperative methods that are a standard part of secondary social studies teachers' repertoires today, including role plays, group work, simulations, debates and other discussion modes.

Impenetrable lectures interrupted by either dramatic or comic moments are often used as a device by filmmakers. In the Michael J. Fox comedy *Teen Wolf* (1985), there is a fascinating montage of three classes (one English/Language Arts class, one social studies class and one science class), each featuring rows of desks pointing the captive students' vision forward toward a teacher lecturing at the front of the classroom behind a heavy industrial desk. In the first part of the montage, a teacher is conducting a discussion about a reading. The teacher asks, "The twins were abandoned and would not have survived if it had not been for what?" prompting students to fill in the gap of her thought processes. When she receives only a partial answer from one student, she deliberately calls on the protagonist Scott (a teenager who, because of a genetic trait, occasionally transmutes into a werewolf), who howls like wolf in a response that the teacher, ironically, credits as the correct answer, much to the amusement of the rest of the class.

Several scenes from these popular films show social studies teachers deliberately wasting students' time with irrelevant content material that is well outside the scope of the curriculum. In *Teachers* (1984), Mr. Jurel opens up the first day of class by taking attendance and then announcing brightly: "Alright, boys and girls, today we are going to delve into the fascinating world of radiator repair." As he carries a toolbox over to the broken radiator, a student complains quite reasonably that, "we're supposed to be learning about social studies, not radiators." Jurel quips sarcastically, "Learning is limitless, Jimmy."

In an iconic scene from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), an economics teacher played by Ben Stein drones on about the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, while the camera pans over a group of catatonic students, including one whose bubblegum bubble pops across her face and another who is fast asleep with a trickle of spittle emanating down his desktop. In the scene, the teacher is shown engaging rather desperately in an attempt to engender a modicum of discussion in his



classroom, imploring in a monotone: “In 1930, the Republican controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effects of the...anyone? anyone? The Great Depression...” (The camera cuts to a student staring at the teacher with blank look, mouth open). The teacher continues agonizingly for well over two minutes in this fashion.

It is notable that the most effective social studies teacher depicted in these films is the Mr. Van Ark character in *Teachers* (1984), who not coincidentally is exposed at the end of the film as a recently released mental patient who has, in an early scene in the film, fraudulently taken the job of a registered substitute teacher at the school. The fraudulent Van Ark is shown throughout the film engaging his students in a variety of increasingly elaborate simulations in an array of costumes. In a telling scene, he confronts a fellow teacher in the lounge avoiding blame for the school’s poor record. “How about teaching him to read better?” he asks. “I am a social studies teacher. It is not my job to teach reading,” the teacher responds sharply. “Ah, but you *are* a teacher,” Van Ark points out triumphantly. As he led away by hospital orderlies in white coats in the final scene, the film’s protagonist, social studies teacher Mr. Jurel, literally salutes him and his efforts within the school.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Hollywood writers and directors seem to suggest in these images of social studies teachers and teaching that there is precious little actual learning going on within the walls of America’s public schools and that, moreover, one would need to be a little mentally unstable to even desire to go beyond the minimal procedures and attempt to teach effectively in the social studies.

Teacher/Student Interactions on the Silver Screen

Social studies teachers in 1970s and 1980s films exhibit a toxic combination of apathy, derision, and outright resentment toward their students. A key element in this theme is the wide cultural gulf portrayed between teachers and their students. Teachers such as Mr. Rice in *Three O’clock High* (1987) are middle-aged, tweed-jacketed snobs who spend their days in richly appointed faculty lounges that resemble the anterooms of the Oxford Roundtable. It is no wonder that these teachers don’t care about their students, the filmmakers wink at their audiences; these academic wannabes have nothing in common with them or, for that matter, with the communities in which they serve.

These out of touch social studies teachers of Hollywood’s imagination employ a deep reservoir of acerbic wisecracks and asides as a means of putting their students in their proper places and indicating their overall disapproval of their performance. In a scene from *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989), Mr. Ryan, a history teacher at the suburban San Dimas High, questions the film’s two protagonists in front of the rest of the class before a year-end assessment. The scene is played for laughs, with the film’s two title characters as the butt of the jokes. In the scene, Ryan says to Bill, “I’m waiting.” When the student hesitantly says, “He’s dead?” Ryan responds in a deadpan: “so what you’re telling me, essentially, is that Napoleon was a short, dead dude.” As the



class explodes in laughter, Ryan regains their attention by refocusing his interrogation on Bill's friend Ted. "Ted, stand up, son," he commands. "Now, who is Joan of Arc?" Ted responds gleefully—"Noah's wife!" The class erupts again as the end of class bell saves Bill and Ted more scrutiny.

In these scenes, there is little or no attempt to keep confidential student information or grades, and teachers frequently shame their charges by flaunting their failing marks for public ridicule. In *WarGames* (1983), a teacher named Mr. Liggett is shown passing back exam papers at the beginning of his class. When the film's protagonist, David, enters the class late, Mr. Liggett momentarily stops his exam review to announce, "Oh, David, I have a present for you." He then holds up the student's exam paper on which a large letter "F" is prominently displayed in red ink. Later in the scene, David's friend Jennifer receives similar treatment. When she is unable to provide the answer to one of the exam questions, Mr. Liggett says sharply, "No, you didn't know the correct answer." He then walks over to his desk and picks another exam paper with a large red "F" marked on the top of the sheet and lays it on her desk before noting, "Because you don't pay attention in class."

Often this tone of hostility is conveyed without a mere word from the teacher. In *Better Off Dead* (1985), a message on the blackboard in block letters reads, "Sit down, Be Quiet and/or Shut up!" Whether verbally or non-verbally, students in 1970s and 1980s Hollywood movies get a clear message that their teachers dislike them and their jobs as teachers and have long since given up on the idea of trying to advance student learning in the social studies.

Myth and Reality in School-Based Films

The overwhelmingly depressing tone of the films surveyed in this paper would suggest that 1970s and 1980s American public schools were miserable places to attend. In even the sunniest comedies featured, the tacit assumption of the main narratives is that there was precious little instruction or actual learning going on in schools of the era. Rather, American schools had entered a period of deep malaise, in which students of all backgrounds were subjected to random acts of violence from their peers, verbal abuse and threats from uncaring administrators, and tedious, irrelevant lectures from their social studies teachers who grudgingly warehoused them for a few hours during the day while their parents were busy in more productive concerns.

However, there is an open question as to whether these images parallel the scholarly record of the period. For one, educational historians have described the 1970s and early 1980s as the peak of alternative pedagogy in the United States. Journalist Charles E. Silberman's bestseller *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970) popularized the Open Schools/Open Education movement as a means of transcending traditional teacher-centered pedagogy that had made public schools in the post-war period "grim, joyless places" (p. 6).



The next year, romantic theorist Ivan Illich went further, advocating the abolition of the entire formal schooling institution in his book *Deschooling Society* (1971). As a result of these scholarly interventions, educators across the country implemented radical reforms that influenced everything from classroom architecture to school curricula to classroom discipline techniques. Gerald Gutek, for example, has described the schools of the period:

The small, self-contained classroom with a teacher isolated from her or his colleagues and pupils pursuing constraining standardized lessons from textbooks was...replaced by large open spaces without restricting interior walls, in which pupils would be free to move from learning center to learning center. (pp. 206-207)

Despite their stodgy image in the films of the 1970s and 1980s, secondary social studies teachers were not immune to these developments. Building from the New Social Studies movement of the early 1960s that brokered National Defense Education Act funding to develop innovative curricular projects, social studies teachers began to introduce inquiry-based methods into their instruction. For example, Elizabeth A. Washington and Robert L. Dahlgren (2009) detailed the influence of Texas-based history educator Allan Kownslar's efforts in reviving a social reconstructionist, issues-based curriculum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Others such as Donald Oliver and his students James Shaver and Fred Newmann began to integrate an imaginative discovery method in the social studies, recalling the 19th century innovations of Swiss pedagogue Johann Pestalozzi. Ronald Evans (2004) noted:

Their purpose was to explore a controversial area, to encourage the student to find where he or she stood, and to defend a position. Thus, areas of controversy were explored, using what the authors termed a "jurisprudential approach." (p. 134)

As a result of these innovations, nationwide assessments of public education during the period consistently show steady progress in student achievement. This is particularly the case when it comes to closing the gap between students of different racial and social class backgrounds. David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle (1995) remarked, "(The) evidence from the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) also does not confirm the myth of a recent decline in American student achievement. Instead, it indicates a general pattern of stable achievement combined with modest growth in achievement" (p. 27). This steady progress within America's schools is moreover indicated in the surveys of parents, a majority of whom gave the their children's schools high marks. For instance, the 25th annual Gallup poll of attitudes toward public schools, conducted in 1993, indicated that 44 percent gave their local schools an A or B mark, while only 14 percent gave their schools a failing grade (cited in Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 112). These positive views of American public schooling in the 1970s and 1980s are rarely, if ever, presented in the films of the era.

It thus seems apparent that the schooling institutions that are repeatedly castigated in the films of the period were far different from those experienced by the students who were watching them. Rather, the filmmakers and actors, many of them members of the Baby Boom generation who were schooled under a more traditional regime in the 1950s and 1960s, were actually



encouraging educators to innovate in precisely the ways that many public schools did during the time that their films eventually appeared. This phenomenon is one explanation for the 1970s vogue for revisiting post-war schools in films such as *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (1978) and television situation comedies such as *Happy Days* (1974-1983).

Free-market advocates in the early 1980s who seized upon the dark images of school life that these films portrayed to propose reactionary measures that would propel American schools backward toward the earlier models that these films so vividly lampooned, however, overlooked this irony.

Conclusions

Rather than the selfless martyrs of earlier cinema portraits, secondary social studies teachers and their practices are portrayed in the films of the 1970s and 1980s as uniformly dull and pedantic, creating a stultifying and authoritarian classroom atmosphere for their students. In films such as *The Last Picture Show* (1970), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), social studies teachers engage in a cynical charade of the educational process, warehousing a captive audience of increasingly resistant high school students in dangerous schools filled with a menacing cocktail of underage sex, drugs and violence. The social studies curricula presented to students in an exclusively traditional form of one-way transference through lecture and rote memorization is understood by all members of the school community to be irrelevant to students' everyday lives. The interactions between teachers and students in public high schools of Hollywood's imagination often surround fiery conflicts in which rebellious teenagers react to the draconian constraints of their schooling experiences.

This depressing and unrealistic portrait of dictatorial teachers, mundane curricula, jaded students and chaotic classrooms would ultimately serve the interests of those who would lead a Back to Basics school reform agenda under the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Moreover, some thirty years after the heyday of school-based teenage films, the images of secondary social studies teachers from these films continues to be employed by neo-liberal and conservative advocates of market-based reform movements in the 21st century. For example, a 2006 episode of ABC-TV's 20/20 provocatively titled "Stupid in America," presented a number of short clips from 1980s films in order to support its claim that schools a quarter century after *A Nation at Risk* (CEE, 1983) were still in crisis. Over several clips from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), for example, host John Stossel intoned: "We see so many movies showing us wild kids, kids arriving at school doped up. The movies tell us that kids are stupid—and the teachers boring."

Thus, it is likely that these defamatory images of secondary social studies teachers and classrooms, crafted by artists projecting backward to their own dyspeptic memories of schooling in the post-war period, will be used long into the 21st century in order support an identical, traditional approach to social studies curricular development and instruction satirized in the



original films. In the face of this attack, a critical response that presents the myths and realities of this crucial period of educational history is a first step in mounting an effective resistance to the standards reform regime that has dominated public education for the past thirty years.

References

Azoff, I. & Linson, A. (Producers) & Heckerling, A. (Director). (1982). *Fast times at Ridgemont High* [Motion picture]. USA: Universal Pictures.

Berliner, D.C. & Biddle, B.J. (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books.

Bernstein, J. (1997). *Pretty in pink: The golden age of teenage movies*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Commission for Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Retrieved July 6, 2007 from <http://www.edu.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/intro.html>.

Coppola, F.F. & Kurtz, G. (Producers) & Lucas, G. (Director). (1973). *American graffiti* [Motion picture]. USA: Universal Pictures.

De Silva, D. & Marshall, A. (Producers) & Parker, A. (Director). (1980). *Fame* [Motion picture]. USA Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/United Artists.

Evans, R. W. (2004). *The social studies wars: What should we teach the children?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Frank, T. (2001, January 8). Markets 'r' us. *The New Statesman*, pp. 21-23.

Friedman, S. (Producer) & Bogdanovich, P. (Director). (1970). *The last picture show* [Motion picture]. USA: Columbia Pictures.

Friesen, G., Jaffe, M. & Meyer, A. (Producers) & Holland, S. (1985). *Better off dead* [Motion picture]. USA: Warner Brothers/Paramount Pictures.

Frith, S. (1981). *Sound effects: Youth, leisure and the politics of rock 'n' roll*. New York, Pantheon Books.

Goldberg, L. (Producer) & Badham, J. (Director). (1983). *WarGames* [Motion picture]. USA: United Artists.

Goldman, M. (2007). *City on the edge: Buffalo, New York*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Gutek, G.L. (2000). *American education, 1945-2000*. New York, Waveland Press.

Herz, M., Kaufman, L., & Treadwell, J. (Producers) & Haines, R.W., Herz, M., & Weil, S. (Directors). (1986). *The class of nuke 'em high* [Motion picture]. USA: Troma Entertainment.



Hughes, J., Manning, M., & Tanen, N. (Producers) & Hughes, J. (Director). (1985). *The breakfast club* [Motion picture]. USA: Universal Studios.

Hughes, J. & Jacobson, T. (Producers) & Hughes, J. (Director). (1986). *Ferris Bueller's day off* [Motion picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Ilich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. London, UK: Marion Boyars.

Kownslar, A. O. & Frizzle, D.B. (1967). *Discovering American history*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.

Krantz, S. (Producer) & Schultz, M. (Director). (1975). *Cooley High* [Motion picture]. USA: American International Pictures.

Kroopf, S., Murphey, M.S. & Soisson, J. (Producers) & Herek, S. (Director). (1989). *Bill and Ted's excellent adventure* [Motion picture]. USA: Orion Pictures.

Levinson, M., Rosenfelt, S.M., Perkins, G.W., Coleman, T.C. & Rosenblatt, M. (Producers) & Daniel, R. (Director). (1985). *Teen wolf* [Motion picture]. USA: Atlantic Releasing Corporation.

Marcus, A.S., Metzger, S.A., Paxton, R.J. & Stoddard, J.D. (2010). *Teaching history with film: Strategies for secondary social studies*. New York: Routledge.

Plantinga, P. (2009). *Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ross, M.L, Holland, T., Saxton, J. (Producers) & Lester, M.L. (1982). *The class of 1984* [Motion picture]. USA: United Film Distribution Company.

Russo, A. (Producer) & Hiller, A. (Director). (1984). *Teachers* [Motion picture]. USA: United Artists.

Shary, T. (2002). *Generation multiplex: The image of youth in contemporary American cinema*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Silbermann, C.E. (1970). *Crisis in the classroom: The remaking of American education*. New York: Vintage.

Simon, M. (Producer) & Bill, T. (Director). (1980). *My bodyguard* [Motion picture]. USA: 20th Century Fox.

Sirota, D. (2011). *Back to our future: How the 1980s explain the world we live in now—our culture, our politics, our everything*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Stigwood, R. & Carr, A. (Producers) & Kleiser, R. (Director). (1978). *Grease* [Motion picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.



Stossel, J. (2006). *Stupid in America: How We Cheat Our Kids*. 20/20. ABC Television. Burbank, CA: ABC Home Video.

Sylbert, A. (Producer) & Ritchie, M. (Director). (1986). *Wildcats* [Motion picture]. USA: Warner Brothers.

Twain, N. (Producer) & Avildsen, J.G. (Director) (1989). *Lean on me* [Motion picture]. USA: Warner Brothers.

Washington, E.Y. & Dahlgren, R.L. (2010). The Quest for Relevancy: Allan Kownslar and Historical Inquiry in the New Social Studies Movement. In B. S. Stern (Ed.). *The new social studies: People, projects & perspectives* (pp. 95-110). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Witherell, C. & Noddings, N. (1991). Prologue: An invitation to our readers. In C. Witherell and N. Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education* (pp. 1-14). New York: Teachers College Press.

Vogel, D.E., Davis, J., Israel, N., Spelling, A., Spielberg, S. (Producers) & Joanou, P. (Director). (1987). *Three o'clock high* [Motion picture]. USA: Universal Studios.