



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1998 Volume I: The Use and Abuse of History in Film and Video

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## **Films about the Fifties: Teenagers, Identity, Authority, and Choice**

Curriculum Unit 98.01.01  
by Alan K. Frishman

I am a history teacher at Career High School in New Haven, Connecticut. For years I have been intrigued with how my students prioritize the decades of the twentieth century since World War I, generally in response to their teachers' own personal likes and, even more so, the availability of useful teaching material. For example, the twenties are cool because of flappers, gangsters, and fast living. While the thirties are heavy with Depression, they are nonetheless packed with lots of powerful images. The forties have World War II, replete with just causes, Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Bomb. And who would not want to teach or study the sixties (Indeed, some schools have entire courses on that decade.) with the pill, the Beatles, the war, hippies, protestors, and assassinations? Besides, it is the decade that influenced most of my students' parents. Of course the seventies are now fashionable, as everything in our culture recycles in twenty-year generations. Finally, the eighties and nineties don't count because no history teacher ever gets that far before the school year runs out. So which decade did I leave out? The invisible, inscrutable, boring fifties.

Yet our students need to understand the fifties if they are to make any sense of the forty years since. After all, so much that informs their lives had its incubation in the fifties: civil rights, women's liberation, the glorification of sport, the rise of teen culture, drugs, the Interstate, shopping malls, tract housing, urban decay, white flight, computers, modern medical techniques, television, and rock and roll.

Of course my students are attracted to explosions, crashes, loud noises and loud social movements. But they also need to understand the significance of social movements within times of seeming quiet, not to mention "social quiet" itself. Furthermore, it is extremely useful for me to teach my students an appreciation of historical subtlety. Einstein once said that he loved to sail on Lake Geneva in a calm because he could better understand the wind when it was still.

Another point: My students consider aspects of the fifties "corny" – the music, the fashions, the hair styles, the attitudes. Yet as we who have been there well know one day they will look back upon their present music, fashion, hair styles, and attitudes the same way. Can I begin to impart to my students the type of thinking that will help them put current fads in perspective, that will reveal the transience of fashion, its origin by manipulation, and help to lead my students into the realm of critical reflection and historical perspective?

## OBJECTIVES

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Film can be a particularly useful medium in the classroom if used properly. Most students consider it easier to watch a film than read a book. Film, after all, is a medium that engages its audience primarily as spectators, through the use of images. And images are incredibly powerful, even if they act subtly on the brain of the spectator. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a two-hour movie with twenty-four frames per second would be the perceptual equivalent of book of 500,000 pages. Yet I want my students to go beyond the stage of spectator and rise to the level of analyst. This I can accomplish slowly and carefully by opening their capacity for reflection and provoking thought by continually juxtaposing the images on the screen with information from other sources.

My unit will focus on the following films: "American Graffiti," (1973) "Dead Poets Society," (1987), and "Imitation of Life."(1959) All three films are set in the fifties, or immediately after. All three films deal with young people learning about relationship dyads, with all their tensions, insights, and possibilities: male/female, older/younger, teacher/student, black/white, rich/poor, good girl/bad girl, mother/daughter, father/son, brother/brother, life/death. These films also deal with four main themes that will be explored in the lesson plans at the end:

1. The search for identity
2. The tension between authority and autonomy.
3. The tension between choice and restriction.
4. The tension between community and "the territory ahead" (I borrow this phrase from Huck Finn America's most lovable good bad boy and the model for future generations of rebellious adolescents - as he put it at the very end of his story: "Well I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.")

## The Search for Identity

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The advent of a youth subculture in the fifties did not occur by accident. As pointed out by Thomas Doherty, teenagers' new social position was "...carefully nurtured and vigorously reinforced by the adult institutions around them. In the marketplace and the media, at home and at school, the teenager was counted a special animal requiring special handling."(1) When I look at pictures of young people before the fifties whether they are at school or at social gatherings - what I see are pictures of older people wrought young. True, I see younger faces and thinner bodies. But, by and large, I also see the same clothes worn by their parents, the same shoes, and the same hairstyles.

If I could hear their music I would no doubt hear the same music listened to by their parents. I remember

clearly “Our Hit Parade” – a top TV show of that era with Snookie Lanson, Julius LaRosa, Giselle MacKenzie, and Dorothy Cullen. Parents and children would gather together in front of the old black-and-white Philco to listen to the same top songs, eagerly awaiting the show’s climactic moment: the Number One Hit in the Nation (for everyone that is, young and old alike). Would it be “How Much Is that Doggie in the Window”? “A White Sport Coat and A Pink Carnation”? “Love Letters in the Sand”? (Pat Boone was a particular favorite of mothers and daughters.) Or, perhaps, that hit among all age groups, a demonstration that Disney, even back then, knew all the right buttons to press: “Davey Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier”?

Imagine such a show today, with Mom and Dad, Junior and Sis, all dressed alike, all listening to the same top hits. If we ever could return to such a homogeneous world, the marketers and ad people would no doubt gnash their teeth and cut off their ponytails. No, we are told today who we are through our possessions, whether we have them or merely want them. And the more niches there are, the more possibilities there are for sales. Clearly something happened between then and now to create this separation of subcultures. And, as Doherty pointed out, this separation started in the fifties and was indeed “carefully nurtured and vigorously reinforced.”

We all like to know who we are, young and old. We all like to belong. We have these issues whether or not they are manipulated by Madison Avenue and Hollywood. Teenagers, however, are especially concerned with identity and belonging. As their bodies grow faster than their senses of identity, teenagers look in the mirror and around them to see who they are and with whom they belong. In “Imitation of Life” Sarah-Jane is confused. Whereas her mother Annie is dark-skinned African American, Sarah-Jane is so light-skinned that she can, as does, easily pass for white. In fact she spends almost the entire movie trying to reconcile this basic identity conflict. After Sarah-Jane and Annie are taken in by aspiring actress Lora (who employs the mother as a domestic and nanny) and her baby-doll daughter Susie, whom Annie rescues at the beach, there are a number of scenes that center on this conflict:

Six-year-old Susie shows Sarah-Jane her doll collection and, in all innocence, offers her the black one, Sarah-Jane throws it against the wall.

A few months later when Annie turns up at her school in a rainstorm to bring her a coat and umbrella, Sarah-Jane is mortified and violent.

Years later, as a teenager, Sarah-Jane is dating a white boy. When he finds out about her “secret,” he not only dumps her, he beats her up.

While Sarah-Jane and Annie are playing out their mother-daughter game, Lora (Lana Turner) and Susie (Sandra Dee) have their own version. Lora, obsessed with fame, fails to notice that her own daughter has become a miniature doll version of herself. Sixteen-year old Susie won’t go to bed until she’s properly “wed” to the saintly, pipe-smoking father figure and photographer, Steve Archer. In an ironic twist on the relationship between real life and its imitation, Susie’s “wedding” a few years later transforms itself into a graduation ceremony which just happens to take place at Lana Turner’s real-life daughter’s exclusive private school.

There is an additional conflict in identity one that has more meaning in the fifties to women than men in “Imitation of Life.” After all, that film is more a “woman’s picture” than either “American Graffiti” (guys picking up girls, drag racing, etc.) or “Dead Poets Society” (set in all-male boarding school). That conflict in female identity is between motherhood and career. In “Imitation of Life” the director Sirk continually draws parallels between the “good” mother, Annie, and the “bad” mother, Lora, in their relationships with both their daughters and their careers. Like Lana Turner, Lora has an acting career and is frequently out of the house.

Like Lana Turner, Lora also sends her daughter to a boarding school. And like Lana Turner as much as was allowed under the censorship of the Hays office there is the suggestion of relationships between the unmarried actress and men who cross her path. Annie, on the other hand, is the consummate housekeeper, and she is very concerned about her daughter. Did America in the fifties approve of a woman choosing a career over a man, especially one like Charlton Heston? Let's consider "Lucy Gallant" (1955). In this film Jane Wyman, playing the woman of the title, agrees to marry Charlton Heston. But on one condition: she won't give up her store. In fact she wants to make her dress shop bigger and better. "I'm going to give them [the local women] an opportunity to celebrate the way they like to, buying clothes," she predicts.

Of course Charlton Heston, who, among other accomplishments during the fifties received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, would have none of that. When he asks the Lucy character who's going to run her store after they get married, and she replies "I am," he intones: "I thought being married is a full-time job. What about kids? How are you going to manage that? Move the maternity ward into the store?"

In 1955 there one was only one possible way for them to get married. Lucy had to come to her senses. Her store burns down, and Heston lends her the money she needs to pay off the bank. Wyman, older now and wiser - recognizing he need of being rescued by a man - finally tells Heston she wants to get married. This exchange follows:

Heston: Who'll mind the store?

Wyman: What store?

(Kiss.)

(End of movie.)

Another film set in same time period that deals with relationships is "American Graffiti." The relationships in this film are all about teenagers - their relationships with each other, and with the adults that hover on the periphery of their lives. "American Graffiti," made on a modest budget by a novice director, became

...a watershed of the modern American cinema, one of the most influential films of the 1970's. The American film industry had suffered a serious identity crisis during the 1960's, desperately trying to adapt to a more radical consciousness, particularly among younger audiences, and still remain in touch with the traditional values inherent in any large industry. There were indications as early as 1971 that the industry might do well to abandon its awkward struggle for "relevance" and look instead to the past for filmic material. Historical settings, of course, had always been common in the movies, but most often in generic terms - the distant past of the costume epic, for instance, or the stylized worlds of Westerns or gangster films...The desire for a return

to simpler times, when moral alternatives were clearer and life in general seemed (at least in hindsight) much better was supported by the national disillusionment over American involvement in Vietnam.(2)

In “American Graffiti” the kids get their identities from three sources: their cars, their music (Wolf Man Jack is the only sympathetic grown-up) and whom they hang around with. The movie opens with Bill Haley and the Comets’ “Rock around the Clock” blaring from a car radio. Rock music from various radios in various cars continues non-stop for the entire film. George Lucas, master American mythmaker, and only 23 when he directed this film, knew something about teens and music. The way he used music as an emblem of teen culture was a clear acknowledgment of the powerful new (in 1962) relationship between the newly exploited youth subculture and rock and roll. As Albert Auster and Leonard Quart put it:

...the fifties saw the development of a distinctive youth culture accompanied by a new (though derived from black rhythm and blues music) form of music: rock and roll. For many older Americans rock music was too loud and overtly sexual, and often sounded merely like aimless noise. However, at its best and most innovative (for example, the rock of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley) the music had an energy, freedom, and earthiness that offered an undefined sense of a new life style, which vividly contrasted with 1950s conventionality. [In “Dead Poets Society” two of the Welton students are careful to hide their home-built radio tuned to a nearby rock station from their housemaster. The fact they even have a radio is of immediate interest to the occasional girls who come into their lives.] Of course, by the late 1950s much of rock music’s class and regional identity had been bleached out and transformed into the mass-produced, bland sound of Frankie Avalon and his clones.(3)

Indeed, rock and roll, by its very nature, was considered dangerous during its early days in the fifties. For the first time music crossed over racial boundaries, with integrated audiences listening to music taken from both black and white music traditions and performed by both black and white artists. Elvis Presley’s hip gyrations were considered so dangerous to the delicate sensibilities of the fifties adolescent that the TV censors would only show him from the waist up.

But there was a more serious, almost political, side to this new teenage music. True, most of the songs dealt with such teen concerns as love, sex, cars, dancing, and having a good time. Yet scattered among the good times we could see the early stages of a rebellion against mainstream, Organization Man, Man in the Grey Flannel Suit America. This rebellion might be subtle, with its emphasis on rhythm, or more overt like the refrain to the Coasters’ “Yakety Yak” (1958), familiar to any teenager and his/her parents:

Kid: Yakety yak, yakety yak.  
Grown-up: Don’t talk back!”

More seriously, the Robins’ “Riot in Cell Block Number 9” (1955) was a song describing poor conditions heading to a prison revolt. The Silhouettes’ “Get a Job” (1958) reflected a mounting recession. (I remember Eisenhower’s wistful motto from the same year: “You Auto Buy Now.” This was only three years after the famous “What’s good for General Motors is good for the U.S.A., parodied in the musical hit “L’il Abner” with “What’s good for General Bullmoose is good for the U.S.A.) Similarly Bareet Strong’s “Money (That’s What I Want)” (1959) became a classic depiction of the growing post-war obsession with consumer goods.

“American Graffiti” is more than just a sound track, however. It focuses on character development. The story

takes place in a small Northern California town (from Lucas's own youth) in 1962, the day before two of its main characters – high-school king Steve Bolander (Ron Howard) and honor student Curt Henderson (Richard Dryfuss) are scheduled to fly off to college. Other characters include John Milner (Paul LeMat), the local drag-racing champion; Terry Fields, or “Toad” (Charlie Martin Smith), Vespa-driving nerd and Milner's friend; and Laurie (Cindy Williams), Steve's steady girlfriend and high school queen. While 1962 is not technically in the decade of the fifties, the life styles and values portrayed in “American Graffiti” are synchronistic with the 1959 dates of the other two films.

In California in 1962 your identity is the car you drive. As the blond bards of California the Beach Boys suggest: “She's a hot-stepping hemi/with a four on the floor.” Or perhaps: “She's my little deuce coupe/You don't know what I've got.” On the other side of the street: “She's got a competition engine/with a four on the floor.” Without a doubt the car is the essential teen-age metaphor. Look, there's Steve McQueen screeching through “Bullitt” in a Mustang 305. Look again, and there are Tod and Buz blasting down “Route 66” in their hot Corvette. (Although where they put their luggage – they always wore cool clothes – in a two-seater car with no trunk is beyond me)

To define the characters in “American Graffiti,” therefore, according to the laws of the day, I herewith present a list of the cars they drive (Please note that in keeping with 1962 California car mythology one of the drag racers has to drive a Ford, his rival a Chevy. It is certainly no accident that “Bullitt” drives a Ford and Tod and Buz a Chevy. Compounding the climactic drag race at the end of “American Graffiti” was the fact that Laurie, temporarily upset at Steve, is riding shotgun in the '55 Chevy.):

John Milner (insider tough guy with a heart of gold) – is inadvertently saddled with the childish thirteen-year old Carol (Mackenzie Philips), whom he treats with grudging gallantry

Souped-up 1932 Ford, a “deuce coupe”

(“She's my little deuce coupe

You don't know what I've got.” Outsider (mean-spirited) tough

guy (Harrison Ford) Souped-up black 1955 Chevy Bel-Air

(“She's got a competition engine

With a four on the floor.”)

Steve Bolander

(All-American boy) White 1958 Chevrolet Impala convertible

(“She's real fine

My four-oh-nine,

My four-speed, dual-quad, Positraction

Four-oh-nine.”)

Curt Henderson

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(Smart kid)

Citroen 2CV, the French “flivver” Juvenile delinquent gang member Candy apple red 1939 Mercury coupe  
Laurie

(All-American girl)

Nondescript American 4-door sedan Mysterious beautiful blonde

(Seems to whisper “I love you at Curt through the window.”) White 1955 Ford Thunderbird

(“We’ll have fun, fun, fun now

’Til daddy takes the T-Bird away.”

Terry Fields, “Toad”

(Group nerd)

Vespa motor scooter Debbie unattached dumb blonde (Candy Clark)

No car There is more to life with teenagers than cars and music, however. Teenagers also find their identities in group affiliations, whether in 1962 California, 1959 Connecticut (“Dead Poets Society), 1959 New York City (“Imitation of Life”) or the Michigan, or South Africa, of today. Here, then, are the adapted results of a recent survey conducted by Ricardo Machine and Darin Martin where teenagers from two distant locations Troy, Michigan, and Florida, South Africa rate their own sense of youth subculture groups.<sup>4</sup> The designations are the teenagers’ own (Kids are always creative with their names). I have adapted the descriptions.

Florida, South Africa

*The nerds* : Shy, anti-social, aloof. Enjoy intellectual discussions. Like computers and the Internet.

*The Jolly Jammers*: The youngest end of the group (ages 12 and 13). Act younger than their age. Tend to show off. Don’t know when to keep quiet.

*Metalheads* : Like heavy metal music. Dress in black. Divorced from reality. Isolated from other subcultures. Rebel against any form of authority.

*Surfers* : Laid-back. Go with the flow. A generally closed group, creating its own styles. Set apart with its own set of signs and codes. Acceptance based on physical appearance. Sports-minded.

*Copycats* : Imitate the styles of whoever is most popular.

*Ravers* : Like weird music. Into drugs, especially speed and ecstasy. Wear flashy clothes and like to show off.

*Snobs* : Feel superior to others. Connected by good looks and/or wealth.

*Dreamers* : Very laid back. Totally out of touch with reality, either with or without drugs.

*Loners* : Do not find acceptance among their peers.

Troy, Michigan

*High-ons* : Druggies.

*Brains* : Excel in academics.

*Jocks* : Athletic types, considered generally to be dumb. However, this group also has the most prestige.

*Nerds* (also called geeks): Dress in the fashion of the fifties.

*Freaks* : Identified by cosmetics and clothes. Body piercing, tattoos, weird hair, grungy clothing.

*Preppies* : The only group identified mostly by attitude.

## **The Tension between Authority and Autonomy**

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One of the most proclaimed virtues of the fifties – good, old-fashioned obedience – is particularly out of fashion in 1998. It seems that today we are more tolerant of deceit, corruption, even stupidity than obedience. Indeed, I have seen many bumper stickers that boast “Question Authority” but none that proclaim, “Listen to the Boss.”

The world of sports – a clear reflection of our value system – bears this out. Today we expect our star athletes to leave town for an extra million or two or three or ten. By today’s standards would Stan Musial remain a St. Louis Cardinal or Ernie Banks a Cub, especially considering that in 1959, the second year in a row the great shortstop won the MVP award, the Cubs paid him only \$45,000?

In the fifties the big threat was communism. At Coral Way Elementary School we would duck and cover under our desks, safe, no doubt, from any thermonuclear blast. My high school history class was called “Americanism vs. Communism,” with its clear implication as to which was better. To work for the Dade County Parks Department picking up litter and animal droppings at Crandon Park at age sixteen I had to take an oath that I was not a member of the Communist Party. It seemed the thing to do. I read 1984 in class and, properly, derided Big Brother. After everyone’s grandfather Dwight David Eisenhower was met with an angry mob in Japan I wrote a letter to the editor of the Miami News decrying “those Nipponese radicals.” After all, Big Brother was communism and in battling the Evil Empire we, the country of the little guy, were fighting against unauthorized hierarchy and authority.

This, then, becomes the place where the politics of the fifties and being a teenager of that era meet. Teenagers already suspect authority. So when communism finally imploded (just as my ninth-grade civics teacher predicted it would) it validated our suspicions about hierarchy and authority. We are talking about authority in all its forms: not just a shoe-wielding Nikita Kruschchev but “Father Knows Best” and the paddle-wielding (and probably sadistic) dean of boys of Shenandoah Junior High School, my alma mater, as well as the paddle-wielding (and probably sadistic) headmaster of Welton School in “Dead Poets Society.” “All authority is equally illegitimate,” the philosopher Robert Paul Wolff wrote in *In Defense of Anarchy* (1971). “The primary obligation of man is autonomy, the refusal to be ruled.”

Wolff sounds like my teenage sons, ages fifteen and seventeen. Movies champion this theme, of course, as



their primary audience are my sons. Let us consider “Dead Poet’s Society.” In this 1987 film Robin Williams stars as John Keating, an idealistic young prep school English teacher in 1959 who inadvertently challenges two heavy-duty authority figures, the school’s headmaster and the father of its most talented drama student. The student commits suicide after the father orders him to give up acting and prepare for Harvard and a medical career. The headmaster fires Keating not only for, he believes, leading the boy astray but for encouraging his students to *Carpe diem* ! seize the day. Several of his students heed his call and resurrect the Dead Poets Society, a long-dormant secret coterie of students who love art and literature and seek to study it outside the deadening rigidities of the school’s official curriculum. The message of the movie is powerful: true community is a rare and fragile thing, and authority is its enemy. And the only way to achieve true community is to question authority – to break the rules.

What’s curious in view of American history after the 1959 setting of the movie is that the message of “Dead Poet’s Society” combines the ideology of left and right. It manages to blend (or foreshadow) the student left of the sixties and the Reagan conservatives of the eighties. The connection to the student left is clear in the pre-shocks of protest we can sense in these sensitive short-haired kids and in their suspension of reliance on tradition. The connection to the eighties Reagan conservatives flows from the very center of the movie itself – in its distaste for arbitrary rules and commands, of tyrannical fathers, headmasters, anyone telling the kids what to do. Given a comfortable life-style such a distaste for rules from above get easily translated into distrust of Big Brother. Could there have a better motto that served both the protestors at Columbia in the spring of 1968 and the corporate raiders of the eighties than *carpe diem* ?

Welton, the prep school in the movie (The movie was filmed at Connecticut’s own Gunnery) looks on the surface like the model of calm decorum (or Yale of 1959): short-haired young white males with ties and blue blazers, compulsory chapel, imitation Gothic architecture. But looks are deceiving, and just under the surface bubble two important points: One, adolescents – of any era – are adolescents. And, two, 1959 is just one year away from the start of the sixties, when even Yale went co-ed. (I was in the last all-male class, 1968. Many of my peers, while anticipating the social advantages of admitting young women did not welcome the competition.) Just under its calm surface, then, the student body at Welton harbors a body of disaffected spirits just waiting for rebellious mobilization.

I must point out, however, that “Dead Poets Society” does not lower itself as do so many movies whose core audience is composed of adolescents to exploit the lowest impulses of its audience. After all, there are no hairbrained pranks. No one wrecks a car, sets fire to the chemistry lab, or does anything more with a girl than make out.

Keating, speaking for the film, constantly returns to his main point: the business of education is not to gather facts but to find a ruling passion, something around which you can organize your life. This is a point that seems to elude most kids these days, probably because it is point that popular culture of 1998 rarely troubles to make to them.

The teenagers in these three movies are constantly caught in the tension between authority and autonomy. Should Sarah-Jane be a “good girl” or an exotic dancer? Should she accept her heritage or deny it? Should the troubled youth in “Dead Poets Society” be a doctor or an actor? Should the hot-rodding (but lovable) John Milton in “American Graffiti” obey the law or flaunt authority. After all, he not only drag races on public highways but stuffs his glove compartment with unpaid tickets. Should our all-American hero stay at home or get on that plane? Is the allusion to the end of “Casablanca” purely by chance?

## The Tension between Choice and Restriction

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Today, compared to forty years ago, we are overwhelmed by choice from the Internet to our personal relationships with all its possibilities for opportunity and disillusionment. These possibilities apply not just to baseball, as in the case of Stan Musial and Ernie Banks, but to all our other important relationships as well.

In the fifties the divorce rate was one percent. In the fifties, for whatever reason, people stayed married. Corporations stayed married too – to their communities. Let us consider one case: the Lennox Corporation, which features the ghost of its founder, David Lennox – complete with his workman’s coveralls – prominently in its TV ads.

In 1895 David Lennox invented and started making his new type of steel furnace in Marshalltown, Iowa. Through the years the Lennox Corporation prospered as a manufacturer of boilers and, later, air conditioners. Although the Lennox Corporation could have improved its profit margins in the fifties by moving to a location where labor was cheaper, the company stayed faithful to its hometown sweetheart, Marshalltown, Iowa. Finally, however, in the late seventies the Lennox Corporation, like so many of the rest of us realized that “The times, they are a changin.” (Bob Dylan, 1961)

Accordingly, even as much of the country moved from the Rust to the Sun Belts, the Lennox Corporation moved its corporate headquarters to Dallas. However, the move was not complete: its production facilities stayed home in Marshalltown. Finally, though, in 1993, the Lennox Corporation tempted by ever-growing choices even as it made record profits threatened to move its factory out of the little town it grew up in. But there was a happy ending to this corporate domestic drama. Dear old Marshalltown somehow was able to ante up \$20 million to keep its one industry from straying. And to celebrate the Lennox Corporation started using the ghost of its founder as its TV pitchman.

This explosion of choice, whether facing the Lennox Corporation or perpetual comic-book teenager Archie Andrews, is in large measure the function of technology that did not exist in the fifties. There were no birth control pills back then to lessen the consequences of back-seat romance. There was no instantaneous communication by computer. While some families had TVs, there might be only one or two channels you could watch. Technologically, anyway, life was simpler.

What choices were available to the teenagers in the three movies we are discussing? In “Dead Poets Society” there is very little choice. Rather, the young men of Welton are expected to follow close, narrow career paths, even as their daily routines are highly structured. We need only compare the restrictions of the dark, wooden, imitation Gothic Welton campus with the noisy, colorful, diverse interior of the public high school on the other side of town.

In “Imitation of Life” both daughters, Sarah-Jane and Susie, have little choice as to their life paths, and both, in their own ways, rebel. In “American Graffiti” the subject of choice is the central dilemma for the two central characters: to go away to college (with all the possibilities for the future that entails) or to stay home (with all the certainty that entails).

## The Tension between Community and “the Territory Ahead”

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There is a longing among aging baby-boomers (of which I am one) for a return to a sense of community that they believe existed during their childhoods. As Hillary Rodham Clinton said shortly after becoming first lady: “I want to be able to take my daughter to a park at any time of day or night in the summer and remember what I used to be able to do when I was a little kid.”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, though, we don’t want to replay the fifties. We want to edit them. We want to keep the safe streets, the friendly grocers, and the milk and cookies while blotting out the racism and segregation, the sexism, the jingoism, the political bosses, the tyrannical headmasters, the inflexible rules, and the lectures on Americanism and the sinfulness of dissent. But, as a history teacher I must ask my students this key question: Is there any way we can have an orderly world without somebody making the rules by which order is preserved? Is it realistic to expect to recreate a community without the establishment of some sort of authority?

These questions are particularly relevant today when there is much conversation about a return to “community” and “family values” in the same time there is renewed suspicion of authority. Hillary Rodham Clinton is not the only one concerned about a return to community. That subject, or at least that word, has been championed by conservatives as well. There seems to be a connection between devotion to the free market and individual rights, the elimination of affirmative action, a concern about governmental interference and a longing for good old-fashioned community. We can see this clearly in Ronald Reagan’s 1984 re-election campaign, which was built around a series of TV commercials called “Morning Again in America.” These commercials featured the kind of stage-set small-town mainstreets the Gipper himself might have strolled down in his Hollywood days.

“American Graffiti” ends on a less optimistic note, however. A postscript to the movie suddenly broadens the scene from a bunch of confused kids in a northern California town to the country at large, with a foreshadowing of the loss of innocence that we know now is just around the corner from 1962. Curt, presumably to avoid the draft, is a writer living in Canada. Steve, the perennial home-town boy, has become an insurance agent. John, the undefeated drag-racing champion was, ironically, killed by a drunken driver. And Terry – sweet, lovable Toad – is missing in action in Vietnam. The innocent fifties are over.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

#### LESSON ONE: Story of a Person from a Subculture

Rationale: This lesson works on many levels, including assisting students to apply their knowledge of history and social studies to a variety of settings. It also enables students to relate their school studies to their own lives, and to guide them in viewing life from others’ perspectives and points of view.

Each student will research a U.S. subcultural group which lives a very different life from their own. Choosing from a variety of forms such as a diary or short story, each student will tell the story of one fictitious person in that group.

Objectives: The student will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an awareness of what constitutes a subculture

2. Demonstrate an understanding of a hypothetical person from another subculture.

Time frame: 8-12 class periods.

Recommended for: High school English and social studies classes

Procedures:

1. Students will research different U.S. subcultures in the library and/or the Internet.
2. Each student will decide on one particular subcultural group which lives a life very different from its own life (such as ethnic groups like the Navaho or Hmong, groups with strong cultural/ethnic backgrounds like the 3. Amish, or a group strongly impacted by their surrounding such as California surfers or Florida trailer-park retirees).
4. Each student will decide on a fictional format to present his/her project: a short story, diary, etc.
5. Students will work on their projects.
6. Students will present their projects in class.

## **LESSON TWO: Surveying the School's Subcultures**

Rationale: This lesson works on many levels. It encourages interdisciplinary learning, reinforces self-confidence, stimulates creativity, encourages students to work collaboratively, and fosters critical thinking. This lesson asks students to duplicate the survey mentioned earlier that was conducted by Ricardo Machine and Darin Martin where teenagers from two distant locations rated their own sense of youth subculture groups.

Groups of three students will develop a survey to determine what subculture each of their fellow students identifies with. Each group will be asked to present its findings in a 3-5-page report.

. Objectives: The student will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an awareness of what constitutes a subculture
2. Work collaboratively with other students

Time frame: 8-12 class periods.

Recommended for: High school English and social studies classes

Procedures:

1. Students will review their findings from their previous lesson, "Story of a Person from a Subculture."
2. The students will break into groups of 3.
3. The students will gather student attitudes and/or beliefs to determine 10 different topics.
4. The students will use a 1-6 Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 3 = weakly agree, 4 = weekly disagree, and 6 = strongly disagree).
5. Each group will interview 25 other students (not in the class) using simple, clear, brief questions which are neutrally phrased.
6. Each article must include a chart of the results and an explanation of the results keyed to the chart.

### **LESSON THREE: Fifties Musical Playwriting Workshop**

Rationale: This unit works on many levels. It touches multiple intelligences (We've been using Dr. Gardener's ideas in our staff development at Career High School) and encourages interdisciplinary learning. Following along the child development model of the School Development (Comer) Project of the Yale Medical School, this unit also helps the students by reinforcing their self-confidence, and by stimulating their creativity and cooperation. This unit helps students prepare for the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) – particularly the section on interdisciplinary assessment – by emphasizing students' critical thinking abilities.

Using songs from "American Graffiti," I ask my students to imagine scenes that might take place immediately before and after the events of the song. The students then develop these ideas into a script, rehearse, and perform it. Throughout the process the students work in groups and critique each other.

Objectives: The student will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an appreciation for and an understanding of the music and values of the period (late fifties to 1962).
2. Write a coherent script based on characterization, theme, conflict, and emotional tone as found in the songs' lyrics.

Time frame: 8-12 class periods.

Recommended for: High school English and social studies classes.

Procedures:

1. The students watch the movie with a copy of the lyrics from the songs in front of them.
2. The students break up into groups of 4-5
3. Each group selects one song.
4. Brainstorming. Each group compiles a list of ideas around which to write scenes. After one class period each group should have selected one unified idea.
5. Students write scene.
6. Students rehearse scene.
7. Students perform scene.

Suggested songs:

- “Splish, Splash” by Bobby Darin (1958)
- “Mr. Sandman” by the Chordettes (1954)
- “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and the Comets (1955)
- “Yakety Yak” by The Coasts (1958)
- “Get a Job” by The Silhouettes (1958)

#### **LESSON FOUR: Comparing the Fifties to the Present Using Debits and Credits**

Rationale: This lesson will combine the curriculum from history classes with those used in the business department, especially Accounting, one of the most popular classes in the school. (Business/computers is one the two magnet themes of Career High School.)

Each student will prepare a debit and credit balance sheet of at least ten strengths and ten weaknesses of U.S. culture as depicted in the three movies, “American Graffiti,” “Dead Poets Society,” and “Imitation of Life.”

Objectives: The student will be able to:

1. Know beliefs, values, and behaviors important to a select group of Americans in the fifties.
2. Know how society's beliefs, values, and behaviors have changed over the past forty years.
3. Recognize key influences on our changing culture.
4. Become aware of how our changing culture affects our lives in both positive and negative ways.

Time frame: 8-12 class periods.

Recommended for: High school English and social studies classes

Procedures:

1. I will review what a balance sheet is for students, showing them examples from Nelke Saab, an automotive dealership I owned and ran in the eighties.
2. Students will break into groups of 3-4.
3. Each group will prepare a balance sheet of at least ten strengths and ten weaknesses of U.S. culture in the fifties compared to today, based specifically on the three movies mentioned above.
4. Each group will also prepare an outline keyed to its balance sheets predicting future trends with explanations.
5. Each group will present its findings to the class at large.

### **LESSON FIVE: Comparing the Characters from "American Graffiti" and "Dead Poets Society" to Students in the School Today**

Rationale: This lesson will foster the students' ability to compare and contrast two different time periods.

After watching, "American Graffiti" and "Dead Poets Society," each student will prepare a list of eight characters from the two movies. He/she will then list several salient aspects of those characters' personalities

and discuss which are determined by the time period and which would be true today. Each student will then decide on one student from the school today who fits those characteristics and explain why that is so.

Objectives: The student will be able to:

1. Know beliefs, values, and behaviors important to a fictional character of the fifties.
2. Examine how society's beliefs, values, and behaviors have changed over the past forty years.

Time frame: 10-12 class periods.

Recommended for: High school English and social studies classes

Procedures:

1. I will show the films "American Graffiti" and "Dead Poets Society" to the entire class. Students will break into groups of 3-4.
2. Each student will select four characters from each movie and describe the salient characteristics of those characters.
3. I will confer with each student about his/her choices and commentary.
4. Each student will decide which of those characteristics are determined by the time period and which would be true today.
5. Each student will then decide on one student from the school today who fits those characteristics and explain why that is so.

## ENDNOTES

1. Doherty, Thomas, Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s (Boston: Unwin Huyman) 1988, p. 46. 2. <http://www.elibrary.com/getdoc.cgi?id=994>. 3. Auster, Albert and Quart, Leonard, American Film and Society since 1945 (London: MacMillan) 1984, p. 42. 4. Martin, Darin and Machine, Ricardo, "Student Assignments on Youth Subculture Groups" in "Contemporary Society," <http://www.btc.coza1chap1a.htm>.



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Biskind, Peter, *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Movies Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Pantheon, 1983. Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993. Brode, Douglas, *Films of the Fifties*. Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1976. Doherty, Thomas, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988. Magill's Survey of Cinema "American Graffiti," June 15, 1995, <http://www3.elibrary.com/getdoc.cgi?id> Monaco, James, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. Rosenstone, Robert A., *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. Rogin, Michael Paul, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. Schickel Richard "Cinema: A Bothered School Spirit.," *Time*, June 5. 1989.

Sklar, Robert, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Film*. New York: Random House, 1975.

## **READING LIST FOR STUDENTS**

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Magill's Survey of Cinema, "American Graffiti," June 15, 1995, <http://www.elibrary.com/getdoc.cgi?id>. Schickel, Richard, "Cinema: A Bothered School Spirit," *Time*, June 5, 1989, p. 78.

## **MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE**

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"American Graffiti" (1973), available on videotape. "Dead Poets Society" (1987), available on videotape. "Imitation of Life" (1959), available on videotape.

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