

Doing It for the Kids:

Rebels and Prom Queens in the Cold War Classroom Film

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The body as a potent marker of youthful resistance served to set youth off from the adult world and suggested that the body was outside the reach of dominant forms of moral regulation and sexual containment. Many adults responded with trepidation to the youth resistance of the 1950s, to what was viewed as the mutually reinforcing phenomena of juvenile delinquency and rock and roll. Hollywood and other conduits of media culture capitalized on such fears by constructing youth as both a social threat and a lucrative market. Redefining teen culture as both separate and in opposition to adult society, youth became the embodiment of alienation, anger, and potential danger. – Henry A Giroux¹

This vision of the post-World War II American adolescent is a familiar one within discussions of teen culture and identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It evokes the ever-familiar popular culture representations of the tormented teenagers Jim and Judy (James Dean and Natalie Wood) of Nicholas Ray's 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*, or the

provocative hip-swinging Elvis Presley and his hysterical fans. The body of the teenager as a site of resistance and control is also at the heart of the seemingly conservative representation of the 1950s adolescent found in short educational films of the period. These oft-derided and ignored screen images of youth also need to be considered when reflecting on our conceptions of American adolescence of the mid-twentieth century. Aimed largely at the increasingly visible American adolescent of the postwar period, these short educational films range from droll instructional pieces providing advice on appropriate personal hygiene and dating etiquette to more graphic traffic safety films featuring documentary footage of accident scenes.² What links this seemingly disparate group of films is their intention of instructing American adolescents on how to become successful members of American society. On face value these films encourage conformity to the social conventions of the adult world, but in doing so they inadvertently acknowledge a life less ordinary. Therefore these films are ambivalent visions of life in postwar America dependant on a tension between the banal and the threatening.

This tension is played out through the body of the adolescent. Rather than simply presenting an idealistic and aspirational view of America for its audience these films depend on a dualistic characterisation of middle century America, and its youthful population, displacing anxieties of the postwar and atomic age onto the undisciplined adolescent body. The adolescent evoked by the 1950s and 1960s classroom film is just as much a site of danger and anxiety as the media incarnations of adolescence that Henry Giroux refers to in the epigraph. In the classroom film, this appears as a threat to the dominant social construct of the middle class patriarchal family unit. Subsequently it also presents a threat to the notions of consumerism and the American democratic ideal that underpins this dominant ideology. In their attempt to protect this model of American life the 1950s and 1960s classroom films also mirror the notion of containment more generally associated with American foreign policy and military strategy of the Cold War period, but also, as Alan Nadel argues, reflected in American Cold War cultural products and narratives.³

The Cold War as I refer to it here signifies the extended ideological, political and military opposition between the superpowers of USSR and USA and their respective allies, between East and West, between Communism and the so-called "Free World". The rhetoric of the Cold War thus sought to divide the world into binary opposites and dominated international relations throughout the second half of the twentieth century. While the Cold War arguably stretches from the end of World War II to the disintegration of the Soviet Empire in the early 1990s the height of the Cold War is

commonly associated with the period of 1950s and 1960s. Nadel argues its defining characteristic is the power and possession of the atomic bomb.⁴ Accordingly two key periods prove important. The post-World War II period from 1945 to 1953 saw the initial growth in tensions and the division of Europe along ideological lines. Following this was a period of crises (1954 to 1964) centred on nuclear standoff between the two growing superpowers and their relationships with the wider world, peaking with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.⁵ It is this period of crises that seems to cast a shadow over the other decades, particularly those that follow it, threatening to return with catastrophic results.

It is therefore important to deconstruct the cultural products and images that emerged from this period and which have subsequently contributed to its characterisation. In addition to the more iconic Cold War images of the Hydrogen bomb test in the Pacific Ocean or President Kennedy declaring "Ich bin ein Berliner" at the Berlin Wall, I consider it important to look to more marginal cultural artefacts such as the 1950s and 1960s classroom film. These cultural products have also contributed to a contemporary characterisation of postwar and Cold War America as they linger in the minds of those who watched them first hand and those who consume them with nostalgia or derision today. Thus this paper will examine the various ways in which the 1950s and 1960s classroom film create, encourage and disrupt the image of the responsible young American. In doing so, I look to identify his or her place within discourses of postwar and Cold War culture.

Classroom films of this period cover a range of important social and moral lessons, including appropriate personal grooming (*Soapy the Germ Fighter*, Avis, 1951), driver safety (*Wheels of Tragedy*, Safety Enterprises inc, 1963), family harmony (*A Date with Your Family*, Simmel-Meservey, 1950), popularity (*Big Man on Campus*, Sid Davis Productions, 1963), puberty and sex education (*As Boys Grow...*, Medical Arts Productions, 1957), stranger danger (*Boys Beware*, Sid Davis Productions, 1961), drugs and alcohol (*Alcohol Is Dynamite*, Sid Davis Productions, 1967), how to choose a life partner (*Choosing Your Marriage Partner*, Coronet, 1952), dating etiquette (*Date Etiquette*, Coronet, 1952), and of course juvenile delinquency (*The Dropout*, Sid Davis Productions, 1962). Due to the sheer volume of applicable texts, I will focus primarily on two examples and their representations of adolescent archetypes illustrating the means by which they construct and subsequently attempt to contain the threatening entity of the postwar and Cold War adolescent. In the 1961 Jam Handy production *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* the social ritual of the Prom contains and even denies adolescent, and particularly, female sexuality through familiar constructs of postwar feminised consumerism and self-surveillance. The nas-

cent sexual and occupational emancipation of the American woman is denied in this film by the containing notion of American femininity as commodity and as consumer, embodied by the Beauty Queen. The ritual of the Prom is the process by which this conception of femininity is reinforced and sold to its audience. On the other hand the 1954 Sid Davis production *Gang Boy*, directed by Arthur Swerdlhoff, calls upon the postwar archetype of the juvenile delinquent to express fears about the instability and disintegration of this postwar ideal of the nuclear family. In this film, the conflicted, angry and irresponsible gang boy is redeemed in the figure of Danny, whose ambivalence towards his lifestyle means that he can be successfully reintegrated into the community by adopting the role of patriarchal mentor to the next generation of potential delinquents. Thus the threat of juvenile delinquency represented by the gang boy is quashed by Danny's choice to transition into responsible adulthood.

While both of these films address the perceived destabilising force of the postwar adolescent, the impossibility of ongoing containment becomes evident in the inevitable gap between the films' idealistic intent and those moments of banality, absurdity, incoherence and unconvincing execution. Both *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!*, and *Gang Boy* fail to deliver convincing representation of postwar America that they require to successfully neutralise the dangers of youth that they imagine. This is simply because they evoke, and at times directly depict exactly that which they attempt to contain. These films therefore represent the ambivalence of postwar culture that is so often overlooked by contemporary nostalgic reflections upon these cultural products.

The good, the bad and the ugly

The 1950s and 1960s classroom film covers a broad range of texts and pedagogical concerns from civil defence to personal hygiene, driver education, geography, history and science. While each of these can be seen to have contributed to varying degrees to the social and intellectual development of school children of the postwar period, that is the baby boomer generation, those films directly representing and thus constructing a sense of postwar adolescent are of greatest interest here. The subgenre of classroom films that Ken Smith refers to as "mental hygiene films" are therefore the focus of this discussion.⁶ Brian Low has observed that the North American postwar "mental hygiene movement" utilised discourse of "mass psychology and social relations" to steer the social development of children and adolescents. In doing so, it reflects the intentions and popularity of parenting and educational literature of the period, if not the actual atti-

tudes of the postwar generation.⁷ His thorough analysis of postwar mental hygiene films produced by the National Film Board of Canada assesses the impact of this movement in Canada, particularly through the portrayals of children in these films. Low's analysis reveals the importance placed on appropriate parenting and teaching within these films thus reflecting their intended audience. While I am taking a similar approach in viewing the mental hygiene film as an indicator of post-World War II culture, I am interested in those films that speak directly to adolescents by representing behaviour models for their audiences to identify with.

As I have indicated, these adolescent mental hygiene films cover a range of educational topics often presented by semi- or non-professional teenage casts, everyday people devoid of the glamour of the Hollywood teen star and subsequently more representative of the films' audience. While the direct impact of these films on the identity formation of those who initially viewed them is a legitimate area of investigation, I do not wish to speculate about the initial reception of these films without more extensive empirical study, a task that Robert Eberwein has recognised is difficult given the ephemeral nature of these films.⁸ My interest rather lies in how these texts contribute to an, at times, nostalgic reflection of post-World War II and Cold War America, and is but part of my broader research in this area. Therefore my analysis is from the position of an early twenty-first century reader and is informed largely by the surviving discourses of postwar and Cold War American culture.

Dealing with similar representations to Hollywood films of the period, the mental hygiene films of the 1950s and 1960s are nevertheless on the margins of the commercial screen product of this era. They are easily placed in the category of "exploitation film" or "paracinema" as Jeffery Sconce has suggested,⁹ and were largely produced and continue to be exhibited outside mainstream Hollywood channels. However, this is not to say they were not widely viewed or profitable for their producers; after all, many of these films were produced in conjunction with educators and with contemporary curriculum issues in mind.¹⁰ These films were produced by a range of companies from the education publisher Encyclopaedia Britannica, to specialist classroom film production houses such as Coronet and independent educational "auteurs" such as Sid Davis who utilised shock tactics in his impassioned attempt to shame and protect the youth of America. Where Encyclopaedia Britannica approached screen education in the style of illustrated lectures, Coronet used a Hollywood style *mise-en-scène* to depict character development and a problem-solving model of education.¹¹ Sid Davis's productions on the other hand took a much more exploitative approach to this subject matter due to Davis's creative control, of-

ten as director and cinematographer as well as writer and producer. Even those films directed by others distinctly depict Davis's universe of children in peril.¹² Despite being marginal screen texts with varied pedagogical styles these films all appear to have an ultimately conservative agenda in keeping with the premise of the mental hygiene movement. That is to encourage behaviour that ensures a transition from adolescence into successful adulthood and thus "a future free of crime, mental disturbance, and industrial inefficiency".¹³

Containing the adolescent

This vision for a successful future America through the social education and empowerment of the postwar generation implies two competing conceptions of 1950s and 1960s American youth. On the one hand, it evokes the patriotic, well-behaved and well-adjusted adolescent who would ensure the success of the US economy and democratic ideal, and on the other assumes a destructive, rebellious or disenfranchised "youth" who, when left unchecked, would certainly cause the collapse, or degeneration of this same ideal. As Ken Smith claims: "Mental hygiene films were popular because they showed life not as it was but as their adult creators wanted it to be."¹⁴ Many of these films rely upon the same "idealized vision of life" that David Considine finds in preceding Hollywood representations of adolescents. Such a vision relies upon representations that reinforce middleclass ideology and the threat posed to this ideology by the teenager. For example, in discussing Hollywood's approach to adolescent sexuality, Considine observes:

In such a social system, sex was threatening because it distracted from building for the future. While parents may have worried about their teenagers losing emotional control, the film industry seemed preoccupied with economic control. Sex, they seemed to imply, at least adolescent sex, endangered the financial future not only of the juvenile but of society itself. This view of life advocated abstinence and the acceptance of the philosophy that good girls don't and neither should the boys.¹⁵

In the 1950s and 1960s mental hygiene film, as in Hollywood films that precede them, adolescent desire was constructed (either directly or indirectly) as something to be afraid of, something with the potential for social, cultural and moral destruction, and therefore something that needed to be contained. In short these screen images of youth reflect what Timothy Shary refers to as "ephebiphobia" or fear of the teenager.¹⁶

Unlike American television series of the period such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), which have become convenient pictures of postwar middleclass aspirational America and also typical of an “idealized vision of life”, these mental hygiene films, in their very existence, recognise an alternative, more problematic view of America. In cases such as the Sid Davis Production, this problematic alternative is very clear. In *Girls Beware* (1961), for example, danger takes the form of sinister teen sex leading to gang rape, unwanted pregnancy and murder, while in later films such as *Alcohol Is Dynamite* and *The Bottle and the Throttle* (1968), the dangers of teen culture are evident in alcoholism. *The Bottle and the Throttle* opens on a crash scene. A young man is being led away by the police as he contemplates his blood alcohol level. The narrator informs us: “Not too many minutes ago that young woman and her child were happy and healthy. Now their young bodies are crushed and wracked with pain.” The logic of fear is clear in this commentary and the blame and consequences are displaced onto the irresponsible and drug-affected body of the adolescent. In other mental hygiene films the problems with adolescent America appear much more mundane, yet they are equally embodied by the inept and irresponsible teenager. In the Coronet film *Dating: Dos and Don'ts* (produced in 1949 but circulated throughout the early 1950s), inarticulate and tactless teens jeopardise the success of teenage heterosexual coupling, and by implication the social stability ensured by marriage and the heterosexual family unit. In *Soapy the Germ Fighter* (Avis Films, 1951), American middleclass respectability and social success is threatened by pubescent boys who neglect to wash behind their ears. Thus the alternative picture of 1950s and 1960s America implied by these films is one of the sloppy, irresponsible, violent, anarchic, ill-mannered and self-satisfying anti-conformists. These are of course characteristics commonly associated with rebellious youth. Above all, this alternative and potentially disastrous America is one that these films argue urgently needed to be addressed.

To me this speaks to the underlying anxiety and ambivalence of American Cold War culture that has come to characterise this period. As Smith argues, these films and their idealised version of life “thrived in a nation traumatized by war, fearful of communist witch-hunters, terrified of nuclear annihilation, and rocked by fears of a generational rebellion.”¹⁷ Therefore, as partial products of the anxieties of the Cold War adult population, these films also construct the adolescent as a site of anxiety for American Cold War society. At the same time these films suggested America’s ability and desire to contain and control this threat as a matter of domestic and thus national security.

Alan Nadel poses a strong case for reading the narrative of containment usually associated with American's foreign policy in the early Cold War period more broadly across American cultural products and practices. This represented an attempt to contain cultural threats from both home and abroad. As he explains:

[Containment] also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that period: to the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishisation of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture.¹⁸

Nadel locates this cultural narrative of containment in such unassuming films as *Lady and the Tramp* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske, 1955), the biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B DeMille, 1956) and pop culture icon *Playboy* magazine. In each he finds parallels between the dynamics of their gender relations and American Cold War rhetoric toward the Soviet empire. He argues: "In distributing the potentials for domination and submission, allegiances and disaffection, proliferation and self-containment, loyalty and subversion – all of which require clear, legible boundaries between Other and Same – the narrative of the American cold war takes the same form as the narratives that contain gender roles."¹⁹ In light of this and due to their reinforcement of conservative gender roles for the purpose of ensuring a stable American national identity, I think it is apt to recognise the 1950s and 1960s mental hygiene films as part of the broader cultural narrative of containment that Nadel addresses.

Films such as *Are You a Good Citizen* (Coronet, 1949) are very direct about promoting the American democratic ideal of participation, opportunity, rights and responsibilities. By providing the American adolescent with visions of doomed rebellious teenagers and conversely specific "positive" behaviour models, however, other mental hygiene films provided another avenue through which to sure up the nation's faith in the American way of life. The scare approach taken by Sid Davis Productions or the Highway Safety film poignantly represents the threat of the ill-educated undisciplined adolescent. Davis's teens for example are far from being the happy, well-adjusted and safe community members that other mental hygiene films aspired to create. Rather they are gang members, dope addicts, boisterous bicyclists, and wise guys roaming free in a world of murderers, rapists and

accidents waiting to happen. Nevertheless, these films still provide solutions to the threats of such an existence, usually by raising the awareness of the audience and encouraging responsible and informed decision-making. As the audience of *Boys Beware* is advised, having just been told about “stranger-danger” and the threat of the deviant and “mentally ill” homosexual predator: “The decision is always yours, and your whole future may depend on making the right one.” This evokes the importance of choice that underpins the democratic ideal, but it also suggests that there is a responsible choice that ensures individual freedom and safety.

The educational films produced by Coronet and Encyclopaedia Britannica on the other hand present images of well-behaved, cheerful if not bland adolescents demonstrating or learning behaviours acceptable to their communities. These considerate, responsible, intelligent and importantly well-adjusted girls and boys are indications of a happy and achievable existence during the Cold War era. Any socially dangerous characteristics of adolescence are addressed in these films before they can spin out of control and cause havoc or worse, become permanent adult characteristics. Another example of this approach is the 1950 instructional film *A Date with Your Family*. It is a step-by-step guide to the perfect family dinner experience, highlighting the responsibilities of each family member according to a well-defined structure of the patriarchal family unit. While Father is on his way home from a busy day’s work at the office, Daughter is expected to help Mother prepare a lovely family meal, and, like Mother, is expected to dress for the occasion. Meanwhile, Brother’s role is to remain studious, complete his homework and ensure his younger brother, Junior, is clean and presentable for dinner. Both teenagers are expected to abide by particular dinner table etiquette, including appropriate dinner conversation modelled by Mother and Father. As the authoritative male voice-over tells us: “Let Father and Mother guide the conversational trend ... after all, they made all this possible.” The film briefly toys with a depiction of inappropriate dinner conversation; however, the majority of the screen time is concerned with depicting happy teenagers, fulfilling their designated roles in the family and enjoying each other’s company. Thus, the audience is presented with an ideal, if unbelievable, teenage identity that ensures a harmonious family life and a confident and happy personality.

Both of these approaches reflect the operation of containment culture at the level of individual identity and behaviour. As Nadel acknowledges of his own experience of containment culture: “Setting up a mythic nuclear family as the universal container of democratic values, the cultural narratives of my childhood made personal behaviour part of a global strategy at the same time as they personalized the international struggle with commu-

nism.”²⁰ Thus by privileging the middleclass nuclear family, the 1950s and 1960s mental hygiene film addressed anxieties about the threat to America from within its own society by constructing a new frontline, that of adolescence.

The offensive strategy of these films – to contain through education – reflects a broader postwar enthusiasm for the socially constructive role of schools and education in support of the American democratic ideal.²¹ Informed by the cultural commentary of C Wright Mills, Lewis points out that postwar education focused on “training for a growing international market economy.”²² William L O’Neill also notes that the postwar approach to education foreground socialisation and “life adjustment” over the intellectual pursuit.²³ In this way it reflected the child-centred, permissive approach to child-rearing of the postwar period, popularised for example in the publications of Dr Benjamin Spock.²⁴ This child-centred parenting according to Daniel Gomes, aimed to create “happy, proactive, and emotionally healthy, ‘well-adjusted’ adults” who could deal with the challenges of life in the atomic age.²⁵ In part this approach involved encouraging a sense of belonging and empowerment, an approach I find also in the mental hygiene film. Thus the classroom use of the mental hygiene film is an extension of this education as socialisation approach aimed at developing successful members of American society. This approach, like many of the mental hygiene films of the period, privileged a sense of belonging and conformism, and the dominance of the nuclear family engaged in a consumer economy characteristic of early Cold War and postwar America. This characterisation nostalgically persists today.

As I have already argued there is duplicity within the worldview of the 1950s and 1960s mental hygiene films, a tension between the threatening and the banal, between uncontrolled desire and responsible behaviour, between socially destructive youth and successful young adults. This duplicity is of course inherent to the logic of containment and is the focus of much of Nadel’s discussion of Cold War culture. He acknowledges the fissures and fractures that appeared within Cold War containment culture toward the end of the cycle and with the emergence of postmodernism in the early 1960s. This was in part due to the loss of faith and unquestioning belief in the metanarratives upon which containment relied.²⁶ I also see these fractures within the execution of the mental hygiene film, fractures that reveal the constructed worldview of these films and thus undermine the efficacy of the intended containment of threatening adolescence. The style of mental hygiene films, their moralistic and instructional voice of God, their non-professional casts, their laboured dialogue and their at times inappropriate, melodramatic music and editing contribute to their camp appeal and draw

attention to their construction. It is in the disjuncture between the serious intention and at times amusing execution of these films that they reveal their fabrication and thus the fantasy of their images of postwar and Cold War era adolescence.

I will now turn directly to two examples from the extensive collection of classroom films that remain in circulation to demonstrate how these films constructed these adolescent identities. *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* and *Gang Boy* present images of Cold War American adolescence, providing warnings and instructions on appropriate social behaviour utilising two archetypes that have become synonymous with twentieth-century American film adolescence: the Prom Queen and the Rebel. *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* is an aesthetically drab film about well-behaved and successful high school students attending the Senior Prom (a bad film about good kids), and *Gang Boy* is a visually engaging and at times poetic film about juvenile delinquents (a good film about bad kids).

America's Junior Misses

The Prom: It's a Pleasure! is an instructional piece on Senior Prom etiquette. Produced by Jam Handy Productions on behalf of the Coca-Cola Company this is an example of the "how to" classroom film, which not only constructs the ideal teenage girl as socially knowledgeable, beautiful and smart, but also situates her within the growing teenage leisure and consumer economy thanks to some not-so-subtle sponsor product placement. This film advises its audience on how to ask for and accept a date to the Prom, what to wear, how and whom to dance with, and how to politely interact with other teenagers and chaperones around the refreshment table. The film assures its audience that, with a little consideration, planning and of course a positive and courteous approach, fun can be had by all at this most important of high school events.

This film's world consists almost entirely of well-behaved and chaste teens embodied most eloquently by its narrator, America's Junior Miss 1960, Mary Moore of Missouri. The adult male narrator introduces Mary as America's Junior Miss, the "symbol of the nation's ideal high school senior girl". She and her date, Dick, the sports star, form the ideal senior couple, and serve as guides for our polite and cordial fantasy Prom experience.

Once she is introduced Mary adopts the role of narrator and, as the ideal American girl, is afforded expert and role-model status. She guides us through her experience of the Senior Prom, with first-person instruction on how to accept a timely invitation from a boy, how to greet chaperones, how to graciously accept a dance from an unscheduled dance partner, and how

to thank the hosts of the after-party. While Mary is integral to the Prom experience that is depicted, as if she has always been part of this particular high school group, her direct address gives her an authority that the other teens are not afforded. This authority is one usually reserved for teachers, policemen, or doctors in the mental hygiene film. This creates a conception of ideal teen femininity that the film's audience is encouraged to aspire to and identify with.

While *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* is concerned with idealised adolescent femininity, most of the advice Mary dispenses is not directed at the female audience. Rather she counsils young men on how to negotiate the event's proceedings, how to go about choosing the correct flowers for their dates, how to politely "cut-in" on a dance, and how to courteously and non-violently take blame for their partners' dance floor collisions. Accordingly the audience is presented with images of Dick and the other teens successfully carrying out Mary's advice. For everyone the reward is a "fun night", but for Dick in particular the reward is also the appreciation and perhaps even the admiration of the ideal American high school girl. The appropriate articulation of adolescent masculinity at the Prom is thus constructed in support of this feminine ideal. Mary is both an ideal with which to identify and an ideal to be desired and revered, while Dick, the embodiment of teenage masculinity, can desire this ideal but must appear subservient to it.

What is most interesting about this film is the intersection between its ideal young American femininity and the now ever-present aspirational image of teen royalty and the ultimate in popularity, the Prom Queen. While the Prom Queen is never directly mentioned in this film, the construction of the singular ideal female figure, nominated by others to this position, is alluded to through the Beauty Queen contest that frames the film.²⁷ The film opens with footage from the America's Junior Miss Pageant, which, the narrator tells us, is sponsored by the Coca-Cola Company. We are shown images of the competition finalist standing on stage awaiting the results. As the camera pans across the line of girls, dressed in full-skirted, floor-length evening gowns the male narrator explains that this is not a typical beauty contest. Contestants are assessed on "character, citizenship, high school activities, personal ambitions, poise and demeanour. Essential elements in the grooming of all young ladies." The prize for becoming America's Junior Miss, one assumes in addition to the comforting knowledge she is the ideal American teenager, is an education scholarship from the Coca-Cola Company. Here again education and engagement with the consumer economy is presented as integral to the transition from clueless teenager to successful adult, and thus the containment of the threat of the undisciplined ado-

lescent body.

This film's approach to teen female sexuality is typical of many other mental hygiene films of the period. Generally, it would appear that these films are aimed at subduing and controlling female sexuality by instructing on appropriate grooming and apparel, as in *Good Grooming for Girls* (Coronet, 1956) for example. Alternatively these films discourage behaviour that could be misconstrued as suggestive or that lead to an actual sexual encounter, such as in *Toward Emotional Maturity* (Knickerbocker Productions for McGraw-Hill, 1954). *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* is no exception. Despite its suggestive title, this film contains the sexuality of its teen characters through total avoidance of sexual expression and a focus on ritual and formal social interaction. As Mary explains, the dance card system "is a way of keeping dances straight and also give the couples a chance to dance with each other", one would assume, without causing any offence. Likewise, any suggestive dance moves are frowned upon and discouraged by our beauty queen guide. This film recognises the danger of igniting adolescent sexuality as embodied by the rebellious nature of rock'n'roll music and dance style.

Timothy Shary acknowledges the resistant and self-affirming nature of rock'n'roll dance: "with its increasingly controversial nature (rock music not only celebrated sexuality but implicitly challenged the status quo by promoting kinetic outbursts by teens, crossing race, class, and gender lines), youth saw that their styles of dance represented form of rebellion."²⁸ *Prom: It's a Pleasure!* addresses the danger that such rebellion foreshadows by insisting upon a more socially conservative dance form. For example, while Mary is clearly positioned as desirable, she is also physically unattainable. As Smith rightly notes, Mary's dress is so voluminous her dance partners have no hope of making any sort of body contact beyond handholding.²⁹

Nadel suggests that the containment of adolescent sexuality during the postwar and Cold War eras is "congruent to and commensurate with the American foreign and domestic policy of containing communism".³⁰ The adolescent body in this equation becomes a symbolic function of American national security and global responsibility. Nadel argues that the responsibility for this containment which he suggests is enacted in part through the ideal of the nuclear family fell on the Cold War woman, and her deft negotiation of heterosexual desire: "Female sexuality was thus always double – it had to be the thing that would gratify a normal male's sexual desires for the rest of his life while not doing so during courtship; it had to signify abstinence and promise gratification; it had to indicate its presence through absence."³¹ This is the femininity we see espoused by many postwar mental hygiene films encouraging good grooming but evading discussion of the

subsequent sexualisation of the female form.³² This comparison indicates the place of these films within the narrative of Cold War containment and their acknowledgement of the dangers of the Cold War world. *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* demonstrates this by encouraging its audience to consider the female adolescent as a body on display. It does so by framing the film with footage from the America's Junior Miss pageant of the beauty queen in an evening gown standing in front of a sparkling American flag, where she is the subject of the gaze and judgment of her peers. But in using this symbol of femininity *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* also denies this body's direct sexual expression through physical intimacy. The beauty queen may only be looked at and admired through the ritual of the pageant. Through her instruction, Mary makes it clear that the same should be said for the Prom Queen and the ideal high school girl whose sexuality is thus contained by the ritualised social interaction of the Prom.

The visual style of the film also indicates this denial of teen and particularly female sexuality. The dance scenes are particularly bland, extended stationary long shots of well-behaved young people politely dancing. Despite Mary's best efforts at "keeping the dances straight" there are moments within this film that highlight the duplicitous nature of the adolescent identity it imagines. The only time when the dancing becomes lively is when a boy starts twirling his partner around and swinging his pelvis in her direction, Elvis Presley-style. They are the only couple behaving so raucously and are framed by a crowd of not entirely disinterested teenage couples. The slightly more suggestive low angle mid shot of this scene, perhaps the point of view of a dancing teen, is in contrast with the high angle, omniscient long shots of "proper" dance scenes shot from an equally morally elevated "adult" point of view. For a moment the film seems to channel the sexually expressive and exhibitionistic dancing of Elvis's famous *Jailhouse Rock* performance, one that both evokes the expression and repression of adolescent desire (Richard Thorpe, 1957). Mary's voice-over indicates that not only is this sort of dancing improper, but the girl has the right and the responsibility to stop this sort of suggestive behaviour before it gets out of hand. Mary tells us: "Any girl that finds herself with a show-off instead of a dancer has social custom on her side if she wants to break it up." The film cuts back to a high angle long shot of the dance floor and we see the girl leaving with her now sheepish dance partner. Order is restored on the dance floor and sexual tension has been dispersed through public humiliation. While the male dance partner is able to show some sexual expression in his dancing, as socially unacceptable as it is, the female dance partner is absolutely denied the chance to do so and is given the responsibility of regaining control over her partner's desires. Even in the final

dance of the evening, which we are told by Mary is saved for the most special partner, the audience is denied any chemistry between the couples. Just as classical feature films have conditioned us to expect a romantic dramatic close up of couples intimately gazing into each other's eyes, this final dance scene cuts instead to the wide shot, returning to the adult position of surveillance.

This denied intimacy is also evident in the fabulously frigid final scene of the film in which Mary, protected by her massive dress is prevented from responding to Dick's obvious admiration. As they are loitering in the steps of her house at the end of the evening Dick proclaims: "I had a great time too. I think it was because of you." However, the audience is left to imagine Mary's gracious and considerate reply to this poetic compliment as the voice track fades and the music swells. Just in time we are reminded of the film's sponsor, the clean-cut Coca-Cola Company. Thus, just in case we had missed the numerous instances of product placement throughout the film, the chaste but ideal teen femininity of America's Junior Miss is once again connected to the postwar consumer. Thanks to the chaste perfection of Mary and her friends, and in the lack of emotional expression in this film's style, the shallow and constructed nature of this representation of adolescence, particularly femininity, becomes apparent.

Fighting an "angry world"

The Prom: It's a Pleasure! presents a model of adolescent femininity that denies overt sexual expression and thus the potential social disruption we are led to believe will follow. *Gang Boy* on the other hand deals more graphically with teenage rebellion, and the nasty side of 1950s adolescence by drawing on social and creative discourses of postwar juvenile delinquency. Within the context of teen films such as *The Wild One* (Laslo Benedek, 1953), *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Westside Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961) the figure of the gang boy rebel was certainly familiar to an audience of this period. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward speculate that the juvenile delinquent is "perhaps *the* ubiquitous archetype in the construction of cinematic boys."³³ Therefore it is an important archetype to evaluate within the 1950s and 1960s mental hygiene film. Comparatively less of a taboo than adolescent female sexuality, male juvenile delinquency and the gang are directly represented in this film, but ultimately disregarded as socially effective and acceptable means of identity expression. *Gang Boy* depicts the enlightenment and reformation of a self-confessed rebel. Using flashback and voice-over narration Danny (Curly Riviera), a young Mexican-American, relates the story of his descent

into the gang lifestyle and the traumatic and accidental death of one of his friends thanks to Danny's reckless leadership. In an attempt to redeem himself in the present day, by integrating into the lawful community, Danny decides to offer a truce to the rival Anglo Pepper Tree Gang, with whom war is about to break out. At the urging of a local police officer, Danny effectively does so by inviting the Pepper Tree Gang to the dance organised by his gang, which now considers itself a more socially conventional "club". All goes well, violence is avoided, tensions dispelled, and the future looks bright. The film closes with the encouraging news from an omniscient male narrator that the community on which this tale is based has continued to deal with its gang problem through socially conscious boys clubs, and their contribution to the welfare of the community through food drives and Little League coaching.

While this film is more compassionate and visually poetic than some of Davis's other productions such as *Boys Beware* (perhaps due to Swerdloff's direction), it fails to directly engage with the implicit issues of racism, socio-economic inequality or cultural conflict that are the framework for the world it creates. Instead it relies on suggestion. *Gang Boy* displaces race and class conflict, in part onto the absent father and the failure of the patriarchal family unit. Unlike other classroom films such as *A Date with Your Family*, the stability and positive social framework of the patriarchal family unit is implied by its very absence from Danny's troubled world. While not directly stated, Danny's anti-social and self-destructive behaviour is blamed on the lack of an appropriate male role model. As Danny reflects in his voice-over narration: "I thought I was becoming a brave man like my father, who still lived in the heart of my mother. I did not know then that it was not a real bravery but a kind of sickness that was always pushing me out in front." The implication here is that Danny's mother cannot make up for the absence of his father, and that Danny thus lacks a sufficient familial model of masculinity. This deficiency cannot be successfully filled by the other patriarchal figures in Danny's life such as the policeman or the priest. While we are not directly told the fate of Danny's father, and thus assume his death, it is his absence for whatever reason that is most destructive. The disintegration of the patriarchal family unit that this absence represents, and the failure of society to compensate for this, drives Danny to become the leader of an alternative, and anti-social family unit, the gang.

Swerdloff and Davis resist directly discussing the broader social and cultural factors that may have contributed to this situation, but nevertheless emphasise the reality of the plight of these young men. In doing so they re-situate the perceived broader social issues of the period onto the individual boy's transition into adulthood. Despite references to junkyards as child-

hood playgrounds and shoplifting for want of money and entertainment, generally the trauma, inequality and deprivation experienced by Danny and his friends are encompassed by the phrase “this angry world”. This obtuse expression resists the usual exposition of the classroom film, and, rather than providing answers to the problem of delinquency, simply draws more questions from its audience. What does Danny actually mean by the “angry world”? Why does it resist further articulation, and how can it be addressed? Danny illuminates this confusion best himself: “People couldn’t understand us now; the things we did, why we did them. Because the reasons were hidden away in those nine years of growing up in an angry world.”

Despite its scripted narrative, and reliance on generalised expressions such as “this angry world”, the film insists upon the reality of its premise, and this is where the first of its revealing disjunctures can be found. In the introductory and concluding intertitles, the film rather bluntly tells us that delinquency and gang culture are a problem faced by every community: “The gang boy is a phenomenon of youth. He belongs to every race, every creed and every colour. He is a symptom of a sickness in society.” Accordingly this “sickness” is adolescence itself. At the end of the film we are told that the events we have just witnessed and their socially restorative conclusion are based on the experiences of the community of Pamona, California. Acknowledging the local community groups and youth clubs who participated in the making of the film reinforces the authenticity of the message. This sets us up to read Danny’s plight as a morality tale and a broadly applicable story of delinquency. It is as if the film is compelled to remind us that what we are seeing is a real problem, of *all* communities, and thus that the solution depicted herein is also a real and achievable solution. As such, Danny and his story are inevitably constructed, as is the adolescence he represents. Again the audience is presented with a fictionalised and performative solution to a perceived postwar social threat embodied by the adolescent. Yet the film’s insistence on its universality reveals a need to address any doubts regarding the importance and authority of its message and its need to contain the rebellious body of the teenager.

Following this, another site of disjuncture is in the film’s construction of an adolescent, Hispanic masculine identity, modelled on Danny. The deliberate fashioning of this identity is highlighted and problematised by this book-ending of the film with assertions of contemporary relevance. Danny, as we see him on screen, is not real, even though he is played by the leader of the gang upon which Swerdloff and Davis based their film. Rather, he is a representation of reality, a model that can apply across communities and socio-economic contexts. As the film insists, the characters

and situations of *Gang Boy* are universal and thus are clearly constructed, necessarily denying any real depth. The “angry world” that is the catalyst for Danny’s delinquency cannot be articulated more specifically as it serves as an encompassing metaphor for any specific community context. This film subsequently presents a caricature of the gang boy whose reason for being seems to stem from poor decision-making, and a general anger at the world based on social neglect. It also presents a depoliticised representation of race and ethnicity within discourses of the period. This is despite the use of setting, such as the orange grove where we first see Danny’s gang working, and the juxtaposition of the junkyard clubroom and the novelty store from which the gang used to steal as children. Thus *Gang Boy*, I would argue, inevitably contributes to a contemporary characterisation of American Cold War culture as repressed. Yet the film does acknowledge the superficiality of this construction of the gang boy through Danny’s narration. “I lived in fear too. But I had to put on a brave mask, and keep proving to myself and the gang, again and again, that I was not afraid. Caught in a circle of fear and hatred, violence seemed my only way out.” Danny’s moments of insightful narration illustrate the ambivalence that these films contribute to discourses of 1950s and 1960s American adolescence.

As is the case with *The Prom: It’s a Pleasure!* the construction of *Gang Boy* as a filmic text subsequently draws attention to the construction of its worldview. Whereas the duplicitous nature of adolescent femininity in *The Prom: It’s a Pleasure!* is suggested by the superficial and pristine nature of its depiction and the lack of emotion in its visual expression, *Gang Boy* draws attention of the performance of its protagonist in moments of stylistic incongruity. There are moments in this film where the actors appear conscious of their presence in front of the camera exuding an air of discomfort, as is the case with some other mental hygiene films that use semi- or non-professional actors. However in *Gang Boy*, this foregrounding of the moment of performance and character construction is primarily located in the noticeable sound design, which, like many of Davis’s films is evidently post-synched. In addition to post-synched dialogue the absence of general atmospheric sound highlights the moments of constructed sound effects, (or Foley) when car tires screech, or punches connect with jaws seemingly in isolation from other noises. This draws attention to the fabricated nature of what we are watching. Likewise, the inconsistency between the image and the diegetic dialogue in *Gang Boy* denies a sense of reality for the audience. It calls for a more substantial suspension of disbelief than is the case with mainstream feature films or other mental hygiene films that rely primarily on voice-over narration with an absence of diegetic sound. It is difficult to describe the inconsistency that is evoked in these moments, but to say that

the dialog has an almost disembodied quality somewhere between a third-person voice-over and an on-set, recording of scene dialogue. This may in part be due to the budget and production restrictions and in part to the pit-fall of the contemporary viewing context of this film, that is, a digitised version of an archived print viewed via an online media portal. However this only highlights the mediated nature of contemporary understandings of 1950s America that look back at images of adolescence, for example, through filmic cultural products. In my twenty-first century reading of this film, the semi-disembodied diegetic sound draws attention to the fallacy of the sound-image relationship and subsequently also creates doubt as to the authenticity of Danny's impassioned voice-over. As a result it prompts us to question how we read and consume postwar and Cold War images of youth today.

Danny's account and his very existence beyond a cinematic construction are questioned in the disjunction between sound and image. But it is unlikely that this is an intentional stylistic challenge posed by the filmmakers. Rather it is more likely to be a result of production and budget constraints, and the more economic practice of working without a location sound recording. Davis, as Smith notes, prided himself on producing his social guidance films on a miniscule budget of US\$1000. He was also dedicated to the effectiveness of his films.³⁴ Thus intentionally drawing attention to the construction of his texts, and therefore breaking the illusion of the visual image seems an unlikely aim for this film.

Despite this, Swerdloff manages to construct a film that is often lyrical and empathic. Particularly those moments where Danny is pleading with the policeman and the audience not to ignore the next generation of children represented by a silent, wide-eyed young boy. *Gang Boy* depicts a characterisation of the rebellious American adolescent, which speaks to the underlying anxiety of the age. Yet unlike the Beauty/Prom Queen depicted in *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!*, here the gang boy is presented as a symptom rather than a cure for the less than perfect America, one that is suffering from the disintegration of the patriarchal family unit and inadequate masculine socialisation. In this case the image of adolescence is one of danger and lack of control. Danny's decision to move beyond this lifestyle and contribute to the community by becoming a guide and role model for the next generation signals his transition into young adulthood, and the promise of a future America. He effectively becomes the functional and present father figure that his "angry world" craves. In doing this *Gang Boy's* depiction of 1950s adolescence remains threatening, as it is unclear if the next generation can be successfully deterred from falling into juvenile delinquency.

Instructional films such as *The Prom: It's a Pleasure!* displace the perceived threats to an idealised twentieth-century America onto the body of the teenager in an attempt to contain them. These films seek to control the behaviour of the adolescent by constructing a desirable ideal and by avoiding any direct depiction of a less than perfect existence. Importantly these films present images and characterisations of considerate, responsible, intelligent and well-adjusted American teenagers who are indications of a happy and productive future. Other mental hygiene films such as *Gang Boy* represent the threat of the ill-educated, and undisciplined adolescent more directly. Yet the style of both these type of moral hygiene films reveals their construction of an image of American adolescence and its multiplicity.

The happy families, appropriate gender norms, and achievable identity goals of the mental hygiene film are easily read today as a façade for the perhaps equally mythic darker side of postwar America. While I would argue that both of these myths of Cold War America – the threatening and the banal – are constructions, their coexistence within the broader context of these films opens a reading of 1950s and 1960s middleclass America that is more complicated than is initially assumed. This view of America is however becoming increasingly recognised and discussed.³⁵ Watching the 1950s and 1960s mental hygiene films in the post-Cold War era we can easily engage in a critical nostalgia for that which never really existed. This initial analysis of the Cold War classroom film reveals not only their construction of adolescent archetypes, it also illustrates the collective contribution of these films to a contemporary view of what we consider American Cold War culture to be.

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NOTES

¹ Henry A Giroux, "Teenage Sexuality, Body Politics, and the Pedagogy of Display", in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed Jonathon S Epstein (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 25.

² These films include *Mechanized Death* (Safety Enterprises Inc., 1961) and *Wheels of Tragedy* (Safety Enterprises Inc., 1963).

³ Alan Nadel *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995) 2-3.

⁴ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 13.

- ⁵ Ruud van Dijk, William Glenn Gray, Svetlana Savranskaya, Jeremi Suri, Qiang Zhai. eds *Encyclopedia of The Cold War* vol 1 (New York and London: Routledge, 2008) xxix-xxx.
- ⁶ Ken Smith, *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945-1970*, (New York: Blast Books, 1999).
- ⁷ Brian J Low, "The New Generation': Mental Hygiene and the Portrayals of Children by the National Film Board of Canada, 1946-1967" *History of Education Quarterly*, 43:4 2003, 540.
- ⁸ Robert Eberwein, *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999) 103-4.
- ⁹ Jeffery Sconce, "'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style," *Screen*, 36:4 1995, 371-393; Many of the films discussed in this paper can be found in Ephemeral Film collections, such as the Prelinger Archives housed at the Library of Congress. They can also be accessed via the on-line media portal The Internet Archive, www.archive.org.
- ¹⁰ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 95.
- ¹¹ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 92-4.
- ¹² Both *Gang Boy* and *Age 13* (1955), for insistance were directed by Arthur Swerdlhoff but are recognisably Sid Davis Productions.
- ¹³ Low, "'The New Generation'", 559.
- ¹⁴ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 12, 25.
- ¹⁵ David M Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence*, (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 1985) 216.
- ¹⁶ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 4.
- ¹⁷ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 25.
- ¹⁸ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 3.
- ¹⁹ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 29.
- ²⁰ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, xi.
- ²¹ William G Wraga, *Democracy's High School: the Comprehensive High School and Educational Reform in the United States*, (Lanham, New York and London: University of America Press, 1994) 84-5.
- ²² Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin*, (New York: Routledge, 1992) 52.
- ²³ William L O'Niell, *American High: The Years of Confidence 1945-1960*, (New York: Free Press, 1986) 34-5.
- ²⁴ Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce 1946); Benjamin Spock and John Reinhart, *A Baby's First Year*, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1955).
- ²⁵ Daniel Gomes, "Bert the Turtle Meets Doctor Spock: Parenting in Atomic Age America," in *The Writing on the Cloud: American culture confronts the atomic bomb*, eds Alison M Scott, Christopher D Geist, (Lanham, Md.: University Press of

America, 1997) 15-19.

²⁶ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 4-8.

²⁷ This image of teen royalty has become synonymous with mainstream teen high school comedy and horror films as evidenced in *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976), *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980), *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Fran Rubel Kuzui, 1992), *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999), and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004). The transformation narratives that are evident in many of these films reflect the social and physical adjustment and developmental aims of the mental hygiene film. Likewise, many of these films also privilege deconstruction or de-throning of this teen royalty character. This reveals the filmic Prom Queen as a false ideal or caricature subsequently highlighting the construction of adolescent femininity in these films. Further discussion of the influence of the archetypal characterisations of the mental hygiene film on images of adolescence in contemporary feature film is an area of worthy investigation, but is at this point beyond the scope of this discussion.

²⁸ Shary, *Generation Multiplex*, 86.

²⁹ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 195.

³⁰ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 117.

³¹ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 117.

³² An example of this is the 1954 Coronet film *Clothes and You: Line and Proportion*, which instructs the high school girl on how to select clothes that flatter her body-type.

³³ Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, "Introduction" in *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth* eds Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2005) 10.

³⁴ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 104.

³⁵ Peter Filene addresses this in his chapter "'Cold War Culture' Doesn't Say It All" in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, eds Peter J Kuznick and James Gilbert, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) 156-174; see also *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons*, ed Joel Foreman, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Post-war America, 1945-1960* ed Joanne Meyerowitz, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).