

# Growing Up Urban: The City, the Cinema, and American Youth

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*"Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke, y'gotta understand/It's just our bringing upke, that gets us outta hand."*

Lyric from "Officer Krupke" Stephan Sondheim, *West Side Story*  
(1961)

**F**OR MOST OF HUMAN HISTORY, CHILDREN GREW UP RIGHT UNDER THE shadow and tutelage of their parents. In hunting and gathering societies, they needed to be close to adults to survive the twin dangers of predation and starvation. For much of history, more children died than survived. Later, in agrarian societies, they were part of the essential labor of the agricultural enterprise, and as other crafts emerged with the first settlements, children toiled and learned their trade mostly beside their parents.

Children in rural areas in undeveloped countries continue to grow up in ways not too different from the ways they had for millennia. The rural way of life, at least until the present century, tended to be "cyclical": generations of children in rural and pastoral areas transitioned from childhood to adulthood without "benefit" of a period of "youth" in between, taking up for the most part the occupations and lifestyles of their parents and marrying and siring a new generation that would continue the cycle. They attained their skills, their values, their beliefs, and the world view mostly from their families and, for the most part, their lives followed a similar course as that of their parents. As villages and small urban settlements emerged, some children were sent away to work for others, but most remained close to home.

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Those things associated with childhood, games, toys, and children's stories, are really only a European creation of as recently as the past four centuries. Most primitive peoples regarded and treated children as infants until age seven. They made little differential between the genders of their offspring, often dressing them alike. After age seven, boys began to follow men's activities in herding, hunting, or farm labor, except that they are not men in the two major aspects of making love and making war (Plumb 1971).<sup>1</sup>

Urbanization and industrialism brought changes in this pattern for many by offering an alluring alternative to the drudgery of farm labor and by providing labor alternatives in urban commerce and services. Although rural life was difficult and often dangerous for children, cities posed their own risks for children. In a scene in *The Crowd* (1928), children run into the street to greet their father and a young girl is killed by a truck. While urbanites certainly knew of the dangers of city life in the streets and tenements, movies were supposed to be a form of entertainment and escapism from the difficulties of everyday city life. *Our Gang* comedies and later, the *Andy Hardy* series of films tended to portray the life of children and youth in idyllic terms. *The Crowd* was one of the first films to address its realities with social commentary.

## Nature and Nurture in the Streets

Cities changed the relationship between parent and child. With the diversity of urban occupations, children were turned over to guilds and factories, and then to schools, to learn trades that might be different from those of their parents, breaking the tradition of millennia of the occupational linkage between parent and child. This resulted in what one commentator refers to as a "de-conditioning" from the traditional association that children have with their parents to new forms of authority. Schools played a decisive role in this process (see, for example, Mendel 1973).

The "City" was also a more socially diverse environment, containing people with different values, religions, and political and social views. Its streets were a different social setting for young people than the farm and the pasture, a setting in which the young might have contact with everyone from the rich to the wretched, from prelates to prostitutes.

The effects of technology, urban institutions, and particularly the physical environment were regarded in both popular and scholarly opinion of the time as deleterious to the interests and well-being of children. This was consistent with what has been described as American “romantic dis-urbanism,” a nostalgia for a pastoral, agrarian, small-town past that was not all that distant, particularly at the time the motion picture came into being. But before that there had long been a prevailing notion that the nonurban, natural environment was salutary and restorative of the true values and spirit of the country. Much of the literature of the nineteenth century recounted stories of erstwhile farm girls and boys who had encountered the city, experiencing moral struggles and unfortunate circumstances that required a return to the roots of the rural environment for salvation. Not only adult literature but also children’s literature portrayed the simple, rustic life as one of healing and restoration from the pressures and complexities of urbanism. At the time, the city was experiencing much growth from rural immigration books such as Jean George’s *Julie of the Wolves* and Betsy Bryan’s *Midnight Fox*, and classics such as *At the Back of the North Wind*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Secret Garden*, *Heidi*, and of course *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* constituting a nostalgic, escapist literature that fed the anti-urbanism of its generation (Kuznets 1983).<sup>2</sup>

*Dead End* (1937) is a film strongly influenced by the prevailing social thought of the American 1930s and 1940s that stressed the influence, mostly negative, of the urban environment upon the shaping of values in children. The title not only refers to a street that terminates at the East River (a convenience that suited well the fact that the film followed a stage play and was itself filmed on a soundstage) but also unambiguously indicated what social outcome could be expected from the dense, dirty, blighted, tenement environment of the alley-like streets behind luxury high-rises of the rich.

*Dead End* takes the nurture side of the “nature versus nurture” argument over human behavior: slums were seen as places that bred crime, which was a sociological as well as popular theme in those days. The story centers mostly on the antics of a group of young boys whose playground is the narrow street behind high-rise apartments of the rich. They beat up and rob a rich kid who lives in the high rise, much to the amusement of “Baby Face” Martin (Humphrey Bogart), who used to live in the street and who has grown up to become a notorious public enemy for his crimes.



© 1950 United Artists  
 Director: Frank Capra  
 Screenplay by Robert Alton  
 Music by Elmer Bernstein  
 Released by United Artists  
 Photo: James H. White, T-107 (10) (see only when authorized by copyright owner)



Martin is the quintessential bad example for kids: he has money, expensive clothes, and people are afraid of him. All except his mother, who still lives in the tenement and who greets his return with a slap in the face. Martin has had some cosmetic surgery to disguise him from the police. Little doubt is left that Martin's criminality is a result of his upbringing in the streets of the slum. So also is the sorry state of the girlfriend of his youth, Francie (Claire Trevor), whom he learns to his disgust has become a prostitute and now has a venereal disease.

Poverty, a certain contributing variable, also plays a role. Food is stolen from babies, roaches infest the tenements, kids fight over pennies, and encourage one another to steal from their parents. But there is also a strong theme related to hardened class divisions that are difficult to breach. Drina (Sylvia Sidney), the sister and sole "parent" of one of the boys, joins a picket line striking against the low wages in her place of work and is beaten by the police for her efforts. Dave (Joel McCrea), her love interest, is an architect with ambitions to renew the area of the slums. But all he can manage by way of work is some sign painting for a local restaurant. With his noble ambitions, and his humanity, Dave is an example that the poor might rise to a higher purpose. Dave shows

that it is possible, but there are no guarantees that getting an education conveys an exit visa from the ghetto. Meanwhile, Drina dreams of escape to an idyllic countryside, a more popular fantasy in the late 1930s than today. Drina and Dave are also products of the mean streets of the slum, but are proof that anti-social lives in them are not an inevitability. Dave even has a brief but doomed dalliance with a bored and self-indulgent, rich girl, Kay (Wendy Barrie); films of the time still recognized the social class barriers of the big city.

Much of the plot of *Dead End* is driven by class differences. At the other end of the social scale are those in the high rises who overlook the cramped alleys as well as the East River.<sup>3</sup> In the screenplay, the rich come in for their fair share of facile sociology as well. Essentially arrogant, absorbed with their idle pursuits, they are insensitive to the travails of the lower classes with whom they live—spatially at least—side by side. Judge Griswald's brother, with his superior attitudes and notions of what is appropriate to protect the privileges of his class, is particularly galling. The socially parasitic Kay is only pathetic.<sup>4</sup> Although there is spatial proximity, there is no social proximity among the denizens of *Dead End*. The rich live above, the poor below, the rich send their children to tutors and private schools, and the poor learn in the streets and reform schools, the rich are insulated in their private cars, the poor get around as they can.

Most of the action of *Dead End* takes place in the street at the end of the river. Here, the young boys convene their indolent lives each day, squabble, plot fights with other gangs, initiate newcomers, and generally comport themselves like they are destined for reform school or worse. Their heroes are not Dave, whom they respect, but figure he is going nowhere, but characters like "Baby Face Martin," or tough guys from reform school. They taunt the local beat cop and the other "uniform," the doorman for the rich apartment building. The impression is that these are kids who are one misbehavior away from reform school, which is more likely to teach them more sophisticated criminal behaviors, and then on to prison. The sociology of the time was that it was the streets, tenements, and lack of parental guidance that made these kids this way. "He's not a bad kid," it is said of Tommy (Billy Hallop), who his sister is trying to keep out of trouble.

A year after *Dead End* came out the film *Boys Town* was released. The community for orphans and runaway boys was founded by Father Flanagan in the countryside in the Midwest, the idea being that a little

fresh air, distance from bad influences, and “tough love” were what was needed to put the lives of young boys on a straight path. The notion that abuse breeds abuse, another common present-day theme, is also present in *Dead End*: Angel’s father is a drunk and beats him and his mother. The pathologies of slum life almost become a badge of distinction; “TB, I got TB,” one of the boys intones almost with pride.

These were common themes at the time the film was made and remain somewhat popular, if leavened by subsequent analysis. Many urbanists regarded slums as breeding places of both social dysfunction and seditious politics. The labor movement was very active and even some Hollywood actors and writers, as the congressional HUAC hearings brought out, had at least an intellectual interest in the prospects of communism. But crime trumped all other cinematic themes for films about and set in the “City.”

The theme of the negative influence of criminal adults upon urban youth was reprised with the same group of young actors in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). This melodrama involved two Lower East Side buddies, Rocky (James Cagney) and Jerry (Pat O’Brien), who grow up in the same tough urban environment but come out differently. Rocky becomes a cocky career criminal, and Jerry a mild-mannered priest. They remain friends, but their friendship is strained when Rocky begins to influence a gang of young neighborhood boys that Jerry has been working hard to keep on the straight and narrow. Rocky even anonymously gives money to the priest, but they are in a struggle for the “souls” of the boys. However, Rocky, the bad example, becomes a hero to the kids.

*Angels With Dirty Faces* is most remembered in film lore for its riveting ending. After Rocky has bumped off a couple of guys who double-crossed him, and had a shootout with the cops, he is apprehended, tried, convicted, and sentenced to die in the electric chair. But he remains a hero to the boys because his bravado is such that he will walk the “last mile” to the chair with a grin on his face and spitting in the face of his executioners.

However, Jerry asks Rocky to make a sacrifice that might even be greater than losing his life: to die like a coward so that the boys will not idolize and emulate him. “You asking me to pull an act, turn yellow, so those kids will think I’m no good. You ask me to throw away the only thing I’ve got left. You ask me to crawl on my belly—the last thing I do in life. Nothing doing. You’re asking too much. You want to help those kids, you got to think about some other way.” Despite

this refusal, Rocky asks his old friend to accompany him down the last mile. Cocky, unrepentant, Rocky even punches a sarcastic prison guard on the way.

Yet, in the final moments before his execution, as he enters the death chamber, Rocky falls apart, begging not to be killed. With pathetic cowardice, he screams for mercy. "Oh, I don't wanna die! Oh, please. I don't wanna die! Oh, please. Don't let me burn. Oh, please. Let go of me. Please . . ."

All this is shown only in shadows projected on the wall, heightening the ambiguity that Rocky might be pretending to be cowardly for the sake of his old friendship and the future of the boys. The newspaper headline announces that Rocky turned yellow during his cowardly execution: "Rocky Dies Yellow Killer Coward At End."

The theme of the dangers of urban life for young boys, particularly because the city exposed them to unsavory characters, temptations, and influences, was a prominent one through the 1930s, 40s, and early 1950s. For the most part, city boys were portrayed as "basically good kids" who could be led astray by bad role models.<sup>5</sup>

World War II changed a lot of things, not the least of them the position of young people in American society. The *Dead End* kids would have been about the age to enlist, or be drafted, as GIs and go off to battle foreign foes rather than beat cops and social workers. Those who returned would also have found the country changed, among them the attitudes of their sisters and mothers and racial minorities. They would find the Depression replaced by robust economic expansion, and the opportunities of the GI Bill and mortgage insurance for veterans to buy new homes. Most of these changes would abet the prevailing notion that they would make a better world for the next generation of Americans, their children. For some, this meant getting out of the City, to the new suburbs where a fresh start would ensure that the conditions that were temptations to the *Dead End* kids would be absent. They would go to college and keep the American Dream alive. Or so it seemed.

## The Youth Generation

The emergence of the "Youth Generation" in America's post WWII years was created by a complex of factors. There were the Beats, and

J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, and there was, of course, Elvis, and the Beatles, and rock and roll, giving voice to youth's exuberance and angst. Along with this came the differences in adolescent clothing, music, television programming, and a host of youth niche products, which rising affluence resulted in what *LIFE* Magazine reported (as early as 1950) as a \$10 billion teenage-product industry.

Parents were changed in their ways as well. They turned increasingly to experts to assist them with the new and different children, children who were not like them in their own youth: Dr. (Benjamin) Spock, who was not a character on the yet-to-be-created *Star Trek*, injected the "expert" into child-rearing that had long been the province of the family and church.<sup>6</sup> But children would also increasingly turn to their "peer group" for counsel and understanding of the changes that characterized their newfound culture. As one observer, in 1969, put the momentousness of the changed attitude toward youth:

By the end of the Sixties this country will have been dominated by children for almost twenty-five years. Ever since World War II the needs, values, styles, and demands of the young have been the major neurotic concern of very nearly the whole of our educated adult population. Our postwar passion to breed, which spawned the baby boom of the Fifties, died, seemingly overnight, into a guilty preoccupation with our offspring, and this in turn has ended by making us peculiarly vulnerable to attack from the current armies of self-righteous puberty and dissident studentism. The result has been that those of us who are now in our forties have scarcely known a moment in our mature lives when we have not been either changing diapers or under siege, when we have not been obliged to seek and shape our identities in the face of enormous moral and emotional pressure from the adolescent or preadolescent Establishment.

(Aldridge 49)

In addition, there was also the zeitgeist of the 1950s, a war won, America on a giddy rise to affluence and, owing to the aura of victory and the technological successes of the war, the feeling that we could shape a society to our own designs. It was a sense of control that could include the rational creation of the next generation: kids were healthier, stronger, a break from the relatively fragile state throughout history in which children were subject to lethal childhood diseases. In a not-too-distant past, children had been commodified as laborers. Now they were an investment in the future, an "investment," which considering



their care, nurturing, and education (much less their rising consumption), would come to be a substantial monetary outlay for their parents. The nuclear family took over the extended family, and suburbs put a distance between them and the senior generation, which used to have a role in child-rearing. With the emergence of the suburbs as a significant element of American urbanism, the “City” morphed into a Metropolis.

### College and Career

The post-WWII period also represented a time in which most young people (in America at least) would likely be pursuing employment destinations that were different from those of the past. For much of human history, the great majority of children followed in the labor and lifestyle of their parents. It might not be uncommon for there to be generations of farmers, or cobblers in a family as it was parents and relatives who were the primary educators of children for the world of work.

The American notion of progress, the idea that each generation could be “better off” than the preceding one, and that the primary route to achieving this norm was formal education, spelled the demise of a system of transmission of not only work skills but also social values from generation to generation. With mass public education, and the enhanced accessibility to higher education, an increasing number of young people would not be continuing in their parents’ occupations and social roles. Moreover, there was the increased likelihood that they might not be sharing, as they moved into adult life, their parental politics and social values.

The effect of the emphasis upon formal education in children’s lives not only drove a wedge in the traditional relationship between parent and child but, at the same time, paradoxically, extended the period of the parent–child relationship. Young people would find themselves financially dependent upon their parents for the long period of schooling that was becoming customary in American society. Whereas in bygone days a young person might be regarded as an “adult” member of the community at as early an age as twelve, the typical American twelve-year-old was a junior high school student, living at home, and, if not regarded as a “child,” also was not likely to be regarded as an

“adult.” This “in-between” period of life, one that in many respects is a creation of the latter half of the twentieth century, became the “teen-age.”

With protracted educational requirements, often reaching into the middle twenties, this period of youth and dependency can extend into years that only a century ago would have been considered late adulthood. This unprecedented period, one of being “in between,” brought with it new, but largely unanticipated challenges and problems.

### Rebels without and with Causes

*Blackboard Jungle* came out in 1955, the same year that rock ‘n’ roll music began to gain widespread popularity among American youth. Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford) is a new teacher in a vocational high school in a tough inner-city neighborhood. During the course of the film, some of the students, almost symbolically, destroy the treasured collection of jazz records of his colleague Joshua Y. Edwards (Richard Kiley), reflecting a rejection of the older generation’s interests.

By the time idealistic teacher Dadier reaches this school, the rest of the faculty have become jaded and cynical about the prospects for the young punks who terrorize their classrooms. The classroom cast has the inner-city demographic range: the needy kid who is picked on at home and at school, the dull-witted followers, the class clown, the outright bad kid, and the racial outsider. The last of these, played by a young (but too old to be a highschooler) Sidney Poitier, represents the talented, potentially redeemable, kid who might be saved by a patient, idealistic teacher.<sup>7</sup>

Dadier overcomes his desire to quit after his friend’s record collection is trashed and his pregnant wife (Anne Francis) is threatened. Using cartoons and a light hand, he gets most of the class to calm down and pay attention long enough for some thought to replace unfettered impulse. Along the way, there is the usual debate that these kids are the victims of tough inner-city social problems such as broken homes, physical abuse, and poverty, against the cynical view, as expressed by Dadier’s colleagues, that they are worthless, unappreciative social trash. The themes were reflective of those being hashed out in political debate and academic journals. There was outright confusion about what this post-war generation wanted, needed, and how they should be handled.

But while there was confusion, the “baby boom” continued unabated. One wonders how many of Dadier’s colleagues decamped for the newly forming suburbs where shiny new schools promised kids who hankered after raising their SAT scores and admissions to prestige universities.

The year 1955 was, in several respects, a transitional year; perhaps day one of the Youth generation calendar. Marlon Brando’s *The Wild One* was released two years before, setting the tone of rebellion among young motorcyclists, shiftless and setting themselves apart from the rest of society.

The recognition on the part of the entertainment industry that youth were developing into a significant niche market brought forth a flood of celluloid trash that may be of greater value to social archeology than to art. By the mid-1950s, surveys by movie producers had shown that a quarter of movie attendees were between 15 and 25 years of age. Their titles, *The Delinquents* (1957), *Dragstrip Girl* (1957), *Hot Rod Rumble* (1957), *Reform School Girl* (1957), *High School Confidential* (1958), and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) (followed by *Teenage Frankenstein*, *Cave Man*, *Monster*, etc.) tell the story well enough. Most of their themes were thinly veiled and often pathetic attempts to express youth’s rebellion, against not being understood, even though youth did not quite understand itself.

What youth did seem to understand was frustration. Biologically old enough to take their place in adult society, which indeed generations of people their age did in fact do, becoming parents, workers, and warriors, the new generation of youth were stuck in an amber of social ambiguity. Neither child nor adult, neither fish nor fowl, they were out of synch with their own biology. Much of that biology centered on their coming of age sexually. Rock ‘n’ roll ballads and teen films bemoaned frustrated teenage love, repressed sexual desires, pleasures forbidden to their cohort. Adults became puritanical wardens, enforcing a morality that seemed cruel and unfair.

The sexuality of “teenage” has no defined transition between prescription and permission. If previous generations and societies had their rites of passage, be they tests of courage or ceremonial passages conferred by religious rites such as bar mitzvah and confirmation, the new generation of youth had none. At age thirteen, a young man of the 1950s was hardly ready to take his place among the warriors, fathers, and landowners of his society. He was more likely to be sweating a passing grade in algebra to get into college. What avenues for

expression of manhood remained were left to those who could make varsity sports teams, the only remaining equivalent of a warrior class and legitimized opportunity to demonstrate “manhood.” For the rest of the young men, drinking to excess, driving fast, taking drugs, and playing at gangs had to suffice to express primal urges and manhood rites.

The dawning of the age of youth was an age not without its material bribery. The War and Depression were over, America was in economic ascendancy, and youth were the primary beneficiaries. There was the Cold War and its terrors in the background, but aside from bomb shelters (many of which became play rooms), and “duck and cover” exercises in schools, it seemed not to be much of a youth issue beyond the occasional reference in youth niche films that the world might end at any moment and therefore why not give vent to teenage passions? Geopolitics would not engage their attention very much until Vietnam and Selective Service.

“Teenage” was not a term or a demographic category before the 1950s, before which those years might have been referred to as adolescence, or colloquially as “the awkward age.” With it came an introspection and self-indulgence. Youth became the subject of their own interest and introspections, fracturing into subcategories and stylistic distinctions. Today, it is commonplace to refer to “boomers,” “twenty-somethings,” “slackers,” “Gen-Xers,” etc.

“What else is there to do?”

It is a telling reply that Buzz Gunderson gives to Jim Stark’s question in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). “Why do we do this?” asks Stark (James Dean). He and gang leader Buzz (Corey Allen) are about to engage in a staple action scene of the 1950s’ youth rebellion film, the “chickie run.” Nevertheless, they get in their respective cars and race toward the precipice of a cliff high over the Pacific Ocean shore to determine which of them will first turn “chicken” and leap from his car before it plunges to certain death.

*Rebel* might just well be the classic youth film, permuting all the elements of the youth culture: the social adjustments of high school, cars, manhood rites, dysfunctional families, sex, and early death. Only rock ‘n’ roll does not play a significant role. However, early death may well be responsible for giving *Rebel* its cult status. Buzz “wins” the

chickie run, but only because his leather jacket becomes ensnared in the door handle, and he plunges over the cliff to a fiery end. Dean, who was a twenty-four-year old “teenager” at the time he made *Rebel*, died shortly thereafter in a real car crash, becoming the first martyr of the tormented teenager generation. Co-stars Sal Mineo and Natalie Wood also met tragic premature deaths by murder and drowning, respectively.<sup>8</sup>



Rebel Without a Cause (1955)

Directed by Nicholas Ray

© 1955 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

Rebel Without a Cause (1955)

Rebel Without a Cause (1955)

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There seems to be little guidance on “what to do” from the parents of these young rebels. They are almost ridiculous stereotypes, eating dinner in suburban homes in jackets and ties (mom wearing pearls), and completely misunderstanding the angst of their offspring. Jim’s father is cowardly, uxorious, and indecisive, lacking every trait Jim needs in paternal guidance. His mother is a social climber. It is little different for Judy (Natalie Wood), who still wants to be a little girl who can kiss her father, but is physically filled out to be provocative to an adult male. “You’re too old for that stuff!” her father says after rebuffing her affection with a slap, and then apologizes by addressing her in a cutesy, childish nickname. Given that, Plato (Sal Mineo) does not know how good he has it to have divorced parents who are not ever

home. He is cared for by a nanny, a large, sympathetic Black woman, who seems the best “parent” of the lot.

If the rebellion was against sexual norms of the times, there is little evidence of it in *Rebel*. Jim seems only mildly infatuated with Judy, looking more for a friend than a sexual encounter. Their love scene in the old mansion near the end of the film is tepid and innocent, and the scene is rather suffused with allusion to family, especially with Plato’s bonding to the young couple as surrogate parents. The implication is that they just might just be better “parents” to each other than their bumbling natural parents have been.

A sub-theme of *Rebel* relates to geographic mobility. Jim complains that his family is always relocating (ambiguously) to “protect him.” He is always trying to fit in, to adjust, needing to make new friends, but is always awkward at it, provoking tough guys to call him “chicken” and, in his (on screen) lack of “coolness,” putting off girls. In some sense, Jim’s plight relates to demographic changes in the American urban landscape. The film was made at a time when more parents could move to the suburbs to avoid unsavory urban influences on their children. But that was attended by a dislocation that required social skills for “fitting in” and dealing with the forms of prejudice and exclusion that prevail in such situations.

*Rebel* made James Dean the first youth film icon. With his mumbling, naturalistic delivery, his red jacket of rebellion (which he is forever giving away), and in his real life, early death, guaranteeing his eternal youth, he was the forerunner of a horde of youth entertainment media stars.

By the 1960s, youth had found a cause or causes: racism, feminism, and Vietnam (partly led by their surrogate father Dr. Spock). The rebellion turned political. It also provided a basis for another revolution that had been brewing—the so-called “sexual revolution.” If young people, even ensconced in their university dormitories, could take on weighty issues of society, then they were entitled, they seemed to reason, to act in other ways like adults. In fact, by engaging political and social issues, they had found a means to give social leverage to their age cohort. Accordingly, music, dress, and film began to reflect these changes. With events, such as Woodstock, youth culture began to create its own private history.

Director George Lucas’s *American Graffiti* (1973) is set in a period only seven years later than *Rebel*, but made with another decade’s hindsight. By the time period of the movie, parents were literally “out

of the picture,” and rock ‘n’ roll was very much in. It portrays an American youth culture that had evolved in a few years into a relative comfort zone of mostly its own making. The question of “what to do” had received more definition by then, essentially consisting of choices to stay in the hometown, marry the high school sweetheart, head off to college, or to Vietnam. Lucas was himself a participant and a product of that generation with a well-developed sense of its cinematic tastes that made him one of the most successful directors and producers of the last several decades.<sup>9</sup>

The car culture displayed in *Rebel* had become part of the solution to the delayed and frustrated sexuality of youth trapped in the newly acknowledged demographic cohort wedged between childhood and adulthood. In *American Graffiti*, cars functioned as the prime means of display and courtship in the nightly passages on the main streets of the city and socializing in parking lots and drive-ins. Young men had found an ideal expression for the hormonally induced need to express manhood. They engaged in risky exploits (the “chickie runs” had their less lethal alternative in late-night drag races), and, perhaps most importantly, their hotrods provided a place of relative privacy for sexual escapades, as more than one film that was made to address this new consumer niche exploited, that ranged from simple petting to “going all the way.”

But *American Graffiti*’s days were the halcyon days of American teenage culture, a period of innocence that had to, for most, come to an end. That end was not only in the emergence of the compelling issues of the 1960s—Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of national leaders—but a function of age itself, of the need to “grow up.” In that sense, *American Graffiti* is a “coming of age” film.

In 1955, when *Rebel* was released, cars, particularly customized cars and hotrods, were part of the emerging youth culture. Rock ‘n’ roll music was at that time just becoming popular. By the time period of *American Graffiti*, music by, for, and about youth culture was a major component of it. The music shared the innocence of the time period. Songs like “Sixteen Candles” and “Gonna Find Her,” and “The Book of Love” focused, like much of the music for youth at the time, on young love and unrequited sexual feelings.<sup>10</sup> In a few years, the music of the “Youth Generation” would turn harsher, more political, challenging all of the social institutions that threatened the freedom and hedonism of the culture.

*American Graffiti* bestrides that transition: the end of an innocent age for a group of high-school graduates that stands for the end of a

brief era. The film revolves around a group of new high-school graduates and their dreams and doubts: college-bound All-American boy, Steve (Ron Howard); the Hamletic class brain, Curt (Richard Dreyfuss), whose sister, Laurie (Cindy Williams) is Steve's steady girlfriend; the class nerd, Terry (Charles Martin Smith), desperate and inadequate to be "cool"; the wannabe in with the older crowd, Carol (Mackenzie Phillips); and the local hot-rodder "top gun," John (Paul Le Mat), who drives "the fastest car in the valley" and feels that his vaunted position is somewhat of a burden, and is eventually challenged to a race by Falfa (Harrison Ford) that confirms his vulnerability. They comprise an almost complete *dramatis personae* of American youth, representing the range of social types that exist in almost any high school cohort.

Most of the action of *American Graffiti* takes place in cars, usually with the radios playing music from the renowned DJ, Wolfman Jack. It is mostly about the concerns of guys (the film is supposed to be autobiographical of Lucas's Modesto youth days), and is driven by nostalgia for the innocent days of high school in the late 1950s and the need to move on to college, marriage, and the frightening adult world that was emerging in the 1960s. It was the model for the hit television series about the same period, *Happy Days*. Nearly all of these young actors went on to successful television series, films, and directing careers.

## Urban Turf

It does not appear that gangs existed in non-urban societies. For one thing, young men were more scattered, schools, as meeting points, did not exist in many places, and there were alternative routes for young men to express their "manhood." In other societies and in earlier times, there have been bonds and social functions—brotherhoods, tongs, associations of knights, etc.—that have formed among young men that provided some of the same functions that urban gangs do for young men these days.

Gangs have existed in New York City well before Martin Scorsese got around to making a film based on Edward Ashbury's book, also titled *The Gangs of New York* (2002). To some extent, gangs revert to primitive forms of social organization. In the mid-nineteenth century



of this film, much of the social infrastructure of the “City” we know today was non-existent. Much of what there was—the provision of employment, access to housing, police, and fire services—were controlled by the political machine. At the street level, competition was often fierce for jobs, for living space, and competitors often divided themselves along ethnic and racial lines. Power and protection, under such circumstances, was largely defined in terms of numbers and control of urban turf.

*Gangs of New York* is a visually powerful evocation of the time period, with magnificent sets recalling the density, squalor, and in the action within them, the ferocity of the violence that took place in city streets of the time. The meticulous re-creation of the infamous “Five Points” neighborhood of lower Manhattan was achieved at a great expense at Rome’s Cinecitta studios.

Gangs were a means of survival in the Darwinian world of urban politics at a high point of foreign immigration to the American city, showing that American democracy was forged not only out of stirring political debates of rights and the federal system by men of reason and milder temperament but also by the courage and menace of those who struggled for advantage with knives, cudgels, and guns at the bottom of the social ladder.

By the time the aerial views of the title sequence of *West Side Story* (1961) were shot, the Five Points area had been leveled and given over to civic buildings. By comparison, the gangs of *West Side Story* seem rather tame. *West Side Story* is, of course, a musical largely based on *Romeo and Juliet*, and its “gangs,” the Jets and the Sharks, composed of appealing Anglo and Puerto Rican youths, respectively, are more amusing than menacing. Nevertheless, many of the aspects of gang culture are present: fierce loyalty, disdain for legitimate forms of authority, and the importance of control of urban turf. The Jets and Sharks graffiti in the film were followed in a few years by the pervasive defacement of buildings and subways in New York City by the “tags” of actual urban gangs.

Urban turf also plays a principal role in *The Warriors* (1979). At an assembly in upper Manhattan of the city’s Warriors, a gang from a beachside area of Brooklyn, end up being falsely accused of assassinating a charismatic who has called an assembly of all the gangs in New York. With all the gangs after them, coordinated by a radio disk jockey, the Warriors make their perilous way through the

turfs of various other gangs. Violence is highly stylized, and gangs are tricked out in various themes, such as baseball uniforms, complete with bats as weapons, and the Warriors themselves like leather-clad rock stars.

Urban gangs in New York also come in for the light touch with films like *The Lords of Flatbush* (1974), set in 1950s Brooklyn, about leather-jacketed and duck-tail hairdo misfits who spend more time on girls and in soda shops than crime. It is perhaps most notable for introducing audiences to Sylvester Stallone and Henry Winkler. *The Wanderers* (1979), a 1960s Bronx gang who sport athletic jackets emblazoned with their names, and engage in not very violent competition for girls and turf sovereignty with other thematic gangs, such as the shaved-head "Baldies" and the Chinese "Wongs," achieved a mild cult status and also employed popular rock 'n' roll tunes.

If New York appears to have been the location for most gang movies, Los Angeles is probably more renowned for being the location of the Crips and the Bloods, as well as biker "clubs" like the Hell's Angels. The Crips and Bloods are primarily Black gangs, but in addition to these "name" gangs, there are ". . . over 600 active Hispanic gangs in Los Angeles County with a growing Asian gang population numbering approximately 20,000 members" (Alonso 1998). LA adds its own particular take to the urban gang scene, especially in the nature of its "turf." The low-density character of its urbanism almost necessitates that gangs function as mobile units, using cars to patrol their territories and protect their enterprises, such as drug distribution, and, in their enforcement, employ the "drive-by shooting."

In contrast to the almost fanciful portrayals of gang culture in *West Side Story* and *Warriors*, more recent films set in Los Angeles, such as *Colors* (1988) and *Boyz 'n the Hood* (1991), have a more gritty and quasi-sociological perspective. These films present, in greater relief, the prospect for young men growing up in neighborhoods such as South Central LA, that life in them is binary: one is either a gang member or in an increasingly perilous limbo.

In *Colors*, veteran gang unit officer Bob Hodges (Robert Duval) and rookie Danny McGavin (Sean Penn) are two cops facing the impossible odds of dealing with "70,000 gang members and one-million guns." Much of *Colors* focuses on the dynamic between the two policemen and their different attitudes and approaches to dealing with gang members.

Their internal differences come close to compromising the tenuous authority they have with the gang members themselves. But among the better scenes in the film are those dealing with the internal socio-dynamic of gang behavior, especially in which gang members profess the importance of their membership in serving the functions of “family,” and the loyalty that they expect from their comrades. That loyalty is partly sealed by the rather primitive process of “jumping in” new members, a process in which initiates are given severe beatings by “brothers” as a blood rite of membership.<sup>11</sup> That sense of loyalty is critical in a social environment in which warfare among well-armed gangs competing for control of turf and drug traffic often results in outright firefights.

Contrasts between the environments of New York gangs and those of Los Angeles are evident in films like *Boyz ‘n the Hood*. The relatively benign-appearing, suburban-style neighborhoods in which this film is shot belie the undercurrent of violence that exists within them. This fact is announced in an early scene in which young kids come upon the body of a dead “gangbanger” who they view with a chilling level of insouciance. *Boyz* deals very much with the difficulties of growing up in neighborhoods where the role models are males who are quick to express their manhood or settle differences with extreme violence. The movie is driven by the pressures on young Tré Styles (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) to maintain his father’s middle-class values in a neighborhood in which most young black men lay about drinking and abusing women, and in which drugs and sex-for-drugs are openly available. Tré, who is destined for a college education, and an athletically gifted buddy, might just overcome the odds, until the latter is gunned down by local gang-bangers. Only a strong father (Lawrence Fishburne) keeps Tré from joining the other neighborhood boys in a campaign of bloody vengeance.

Gangs will likely continue to be a significant social feature of American urbanism and consequently a recurrent cinematic theme. They present irresistible dramatic elements such as the return to “primitive” social organization as a response to discrimination and repression, or family disorganization; they create the dramatic tension between legitimate authority and the solidarity of indigenous social organizations, and the tensions of the insider and the outsider. And in a time when urban space is traversed by speed and telecommunications they reaffirm the power of turf in social identity and solidarity.



Blackboard Jungle (1955)  
 Directed by Richard Dix  
 Screenplay by Louis Lomax  
 Music by Elmer Bernstein  
 Cast: Columbia Pictures/Panorama © Columbia Pictures

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## Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll

These three pervasive ingredients of youth culture and many youth films do not necessarily appear together, or in that order. Sex has been a part of life and film well before films about urban life, but the particular angst of growing to an age of sexual maturity while remaining socially adolescent has given sex, in films about growing up in the city, a particular slant. Scores of unmemorable *Beach Blanket* and *Gidget* movies have been mostly about unrequited urges of teenagers of the 1950s and later reprises of the subject such as the musical *Grease* (1978). Most of these have little to do with exploring or exposing dimensions of urban life in any interesting way, if at all. Most concentrate upon infatuation, falling in and out of love, social class and parental conflicts, and other dramatic elements of high school age. In the 1980s there was a revival of youth coming-of-age comedies, such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Breakfast Club* (1984), and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), filmed mostly in suburban Illinois and directed by John Hughes.

When in 1955 *Blackboard Jungle* was introduced with the song "Rock Around the Clock," it signaled an abiding fusion between the youth film and the music that came to be associated with the concerns

of the young generation. *American Graffiti* used rock 'n' roll music in virtually every scene and knitted together an almost plotless meander through one summer evening with the selections of famous disk jockey, Wolfman Jack, on the radios of the cars that cruised the streets. The streets of Modesto could have been the streets of many American cities at the time.

Despite the fact that the rhythm and blues roots of rock 'n' roll were in small towns and rural areas, it quickly became an "urban" form of musical expression and among many youth an almost obsessive element in their lifestyle. In a memorable scene from *Diner* (1982), set in 1959 Baltimore, "Shrevie" (Daniel Stern), upbraids his wife, Beth (Ellen Barkin), for not appreciating the importance of his rock 'n' roll record collection, which he has meticulously catalogued and from which he can provide the most trivial details with perfect recall.

By the 1970s, the culture of rock 'n' roll—its iconic bands, the tours and concerts, and the almost fetishistic worship of its star performers—had become a consuming lifestyle for many young people and a multi-billion dollar business.<sup>12</sup> The "groupie" lifestyle of rock and roll is chronicled in *Almost Famous* (2000), a story loosely based on the actual experiences of the film's director, Cameron Crowe. A 15-year-old boy (Patrick Fugit) gets an opportunity to travel with a rock band, "Stillwater," on a 1973 tour after submitting his record reviews for an underground newspaper to a local rock magazine and *Rolling Stone* magazine agrees to bankroll him on a concert tour with the group. There he meets the "Band Aids," groupies who follow the band and minister to the sexual needs and substance abuse of Stillwater's players.

For some, the difficult and confusing passages of youth are tolerable not just with the background music of rock 'n' roll, but also requires altered states of consciousness. Drugs have been a subject of films, directly, or indirectly, since the beginning of film. In Chaplin's 1917 *Easy Street*, a comic scene takes on a sinister aspect when a junkie shoots up in the basement of a saloon and ties to rape the heroine. Chaplin, playing a cop, accidentally gets stuck with needle and, cranked up with the drug, pummels the rapist, and proceeds to subdue the rest of the riff-raff in the bar.

What might be termed the light touch on drugs is evidenced by the character Jeff Spicoli (Sean Penn), one of the students experiencing *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982). Spicoli is a likeable, almost admired

“surfer dude” who has been “stoned” since the fifth grade with the slurred speech and let the good times roll attitude that belies the potential for eventual overdose. The light touch might owe to the fact that *Fast Times* is a comedy set mostly in a high school and suburban mall and treats casual sex, abortion, substance abuse, and reckless driving as devoid of consequence. The only two adults in the film are a cynical history teacher and a nerdy man trying to get his money back on a mostly eaten breakfast at a fast food establishment. Although amusing, *Fast Times* conveys the notion that it is a period in which young people can do adult things without adult responsibilities. However, it also “documents” to some degree the phenomenon of mall life in American cities and suburbs, new, air-conditioned “towns” of fast food joints, multiplex theaters, and brand name shops that have become the meet and hang-out venue for many of America’s youth.

By contrast, director Gus Van Sant chose the gritty areas under overpasses and in front of derelict buildings in Portland and Seattle for his *Drugstore Cowboy* (1979). Set in 1971, it is about drugs as a consuming lifestyle for a “crew” of young adults that burgles drugs from pharmacies. *Drugstore Cowboy* is not one of those drugs films that traces a descent into debauchery and final destruction due to drugs. Addict and parolee Bobby (Matt Dillon) leads a crew that consists of his wife (Kelly Lynch) and another couple who enjoy the highs of the robbery as well as the drugs and live materially decent lives. The destruction is more insidious. Nadine (Heather Graham) dies from an overdose because she is just trying to fit in better with the crew; getting high takes on greater preference for Bobby and his wife than sexual intimacy (eventually, she prefers to remain with her addiction than with Bobby when he tries to get off drugs).<sup>13</sup> Bobby and his crew seem a cut above the countless runaways and lost souls in the seedy underbellies of inner cities. The lifestyle does not seem that deleterious if one is clever and lucky and is almost family-like. Even though Bobby manages to get clean, he recognizes that he is once and for all addicted to more than the drugs, but an addiction to not really growing up. As he puts it: “To begin with, nobody, and I mean nobody can talk a junkie out of usin’. You can talk to them for years, but sooner or later they’re gonna get hold of somethin’. Maybe it’s not dope, maybe it’s booze, maybe it’s glue, maybe it’s gasoline. Maybe it’s a gunshot in the head. But somethin’. Somethin’ to release the pressures of their everyday life; like havin’ to tie their shoes.”

## All Grown Up and No Place to Go

With college and graduate school increasingly part of “growing up” in metropolitan society in which most work is in personal and professional services, the period of youth often extends in the periods in which young people are referred to as “twenty-somethings” and even “thirty-somethings.” Audiences for which teenage movies were designed graduated to a slightly more mature cinematic niche that addressed and played upon problems of adjusting to, or avoiding, full-fledged adulthood.

Perhaps the most celebrated of films in this genre is *The Graduate* (1967), a film that is in some sense a time capsule of attitudes before the onset of the sexual revolution. Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman), a recent college graduate, is entirely unmotivated to get on with his life, spending much of his time floating around in the family pool. He ignores a family friend’s advice to get into plastics as the coming business venture,<sup>14</sup> instead having an affair with his wife and falling for his lovely but rather simple daughter. The only motivated action he takes is to crash her wedding and get her to run off with him. But where? And to what?

Benjamin Braddock would probably have been a little too “West Coast” to fit in with the crowd that are the *dramatis personae* for *Metropolitan* (1990), although the premise for this comedy of upper-class manners about preppies who refer to themselves as the UHB, or “urban haute bourgeoisie,” is the invitation into their midst of a young man of lesser pedigree. They are the Park Avenue set of debutantes whose round of activities is amusing themselves with games and parties, and Tom Townsend (Edward Clements) is only given entrée because they are in need of another male escort. He, from the West Side, and wearing clothes that are not “in,” adds some romantic interest, but even he gives little movement to the doings of self-absorbed and indolent privileged people who inhabit a latter-day Jane Austen salon.

The 1980s were often referred to as “the me decade,” and films like *St. Elmo’s Fire* (1985) seem to fit the appellation. A group of college graduates in Washington, DC, poised on the brink of the rest of their lives, hardly seem capable of accepting the responsibilities of adulthood. University life does not seem to have prepared them for transitioning to adulthood, rather it has left them with matters of unresolved sexuality, inability to accept responsibility, and other problems of extended

adolescence. Much as they did in college, they hang out together (at the St. Elmo's Fire Pub), often trying their friendships and attempting to come to grips with the realities of adulthood they need to face.

The tagline for *Diner* (1982) was: "Suddenly, life was more than French fries, gravy and girls." Barry Levinson's movie is set in 1959, but it, too, has some "me generation" sensibilities. This time the clique hanging out together for protection against threatening adulthood is a bunch of guys in Baltimore. More consistent with the 1950s, some have gone off to college, and others have remained on the home turf, working in the family business or scrounging a life out of debts and handouts. What they share is the camaraderie of the diner—in this case that uniquely urban creation that was part Quonset hut, part trolley car that was often tucked into a too-small lot, or on a vacant site, with a long counter, and plastic-covered booths with tableside juke players. It is here they convene to kibitz, cajole, and plot pranks.

*Diner's* cast of characters seems much more drawn from life than those of *Metropolitan* and *St. Elmo's Fire*, more idiosyncratic than stereotypical. If they are male chauvinists, and they are, they are more amusing about it. Boogie (Mickey Rourke) bets the guys he can get his penis touched by a certain girl and manages to win with the assistance of a box of popcorn at the movies. Eddie (Steve Guttenberg) will not marry his girl unless she can pass a test of facts about his favorite football team, the Baltimore Colts. However, the diner scenes are the most enduring, a private world of jokes they already know the punch lines for, or personality quirks well tolerated, and the comfort and assurances that can hold off a more serious world within the tin walls of a diner.

"You live with your parents, you hang with your buddies and on Saturday nights you burn it all off at 2001 Odyssey. You're a cliché. You're nowhere, goin' no place." That is how Tony Manero's (John Travolta) dance partner, Stephanie (Karen Gorney), characterized him when they were not getting along in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). Manero is a Brooklynite from the "urban bas proletariat" rather than the UHB, a twenty-year-old who is interested in his own looks, the applause he gets for dancing to disco music, with the sole, vague, aspiration to somehow get to Manhattan. There are other elements to Tony's self-absorption. His mother clearly favors his older brother, who is a priest and always referred to as "Father Frank, Jr.," and his father belittles Tony's job in a paint store and slaps him around if he shows





## NOTES

1. Children were, in past times, e.g. Spain, dressed and presumably treated, as miniature adults. Even today, there are ceremonies, for example in Burma, where children are dressed as adults or festivals, in southern China, where children are dressed, made up, and paraded as adults.
2. Anti-urbanism and pastoral in children's literature are also treated in Clapp, James A. (1973).
3. This juxtaposition is not just a cinematic convenience. There are many areas in New York City where the swells reside "cheek by jowl" with the less fortunate social classes.
4. The combination of dislike and envy of the upper class also remains a popular dramatic theme: television series such as "Dynasty," "Dallas," and their offspring thrive on the social dysfunctions of wealthy families (as do many tabloids).
5. The street kids of *Dead End*—Billy Halop, Bobby Jordan, Gabriel Dell, Huntz Hall, Leo Gorcey, and Bernard Punsley—had also played the same roles in the stage version of the story. They went on to become The Bowery Boys. "The Bowery Boys Series" grew out of the "Dead End Kids" films of 1937–43 and the "East Side Kids" series of 1940–45. In the following year, they appeared with such costars as James Cagney (*Angels with Dirty Faces*), Humphrey Bogart (*Crime School*), and John Garfield (*He Made Me a Criminal*). Most of these films maintained the sociological point of view of portraying these kids as victims of their urban environment. However, as the series progressed, and perhaps because the social-deterministic explanation of such behavior lost currency, their films moved to comedy and farce. In all, they made some 48 films and were made right up to the 1950s.
6. An interesting approach to this subject is that of Lasch, Christopher (1977).
7. Poitier went on to play exactly the same role in a film about almost identical punks in a British high school, *To Sir, With Love* (1966). It is also noteworthy that this portrayal of such problems in American schools was not what some political figures wished to become widely known. At the time of its release, Ambassador to Italy Claire Boothe Luce did not want the film to be screened at the Venice Film Festival.
8. Remaining "young forever" has also been achieved by several others in the youth star pantheon, among them Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, Freddie Prinze, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and River Phoenix.
9. Born in 1944, in Modesto, California, the locus of *American Graffiti*, Lucas is primarily associated with the immensely successful *Star Wars* films, which has a cult following that spans his generation and the next.
10. Part of youth identity was for many the particular type of rock music one preferred. Rock stars became new youth gods and role models, and collections of music, at the time on "45" records, became obsessive with some youth. See, for example, the role played by Daniel Stern in Barry Levinson's *Diner*.
11. This ceremony of "jumping in" also appears to apply to the initiation of girls into gangs (Lyden, J. and Ardalan, D. 2003), and is also borrowed from, or imitated by Maori gangs in New Zealand. The Auckland film *Once Were Warriors* (1994) contains a brutal scene of a young man being initiated.
12. In the case of the followers of some rock groups, such as The Grateful Dead, fans have been known to follow their beloved band to concerts around the country well into their "adult" years. Indeed, the culture of rock and roll can no longer be said to be the province entirely of the young when its leading performers, such as The Rolling Stones, are older than the parents of their fans.
13. This is reminiscent of another excellent film about addiction (alcohol), *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962).
14. At the time it was not known that the SF Bay area would spawn Silicon Valley, a revolution in plastics that would make (and break) many young millionaires and billionaires.

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