Toilet Training: The Meanings of Bathroom Scenes in School Movies

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ABSTRACT: Bathroom scenes in school movies are a venue for violence but also a refuge from peer pressure and administrative scrutiny. The Hollywood movie *Charlie Bartlett* (2008) focuses on the issue of privacy in the public high school, with Charlie operating a pseudo-psychiatric clinic and pharmacy from the boys restroom. No other Hollywood movie focuses such attention on the toilet, yet portrays tranquil *public* life as an even more valued goal, making the film a prime example of the social integration genre. That social integration is achieved at the expense of individualism is the film's implicit critique of the common school in contemporary American society. The film segues from the privacy of the toilet to the revolt against the invasion of privacy when the school installs security cameras in the student lounge. The cameras represent the school's failure to create either a caring community or an effectively functioning *polis*. Thus, the film is harsh in its assessment of high school education as a civilizing force.

RESUME: Dans les films se passant dans les milieux scolaires, les toilettes représentent un lieu pour la violence mais aussi un lieu-refuge pour être loin de la contrainte administrative. Le film hollywoodien *Charlie Bartlett* (2008) met l'accent sur le besoin d'intimité dans une école secondaire publique. Charlie s'improvise psychiatre et pharmacien dans les toilettes des garçons. Aucun autre film ne met autant l'accent sur les toilettes que celui-ci. Il y dépeint même une vie *publique* tranquille avec un objectif très précieux et aussi de faire d'un film un premier exemple du genre d'intégration sociale. A travers la critique du film sur l'école publique dans la société américaine contemporaine, on comprend que l'on parvient à cette intégration sociale au détriment de l'individualisme. Lorsque la direction de l'école installe des caméras de sécurité dans la salle des élèves, le film passe alors de l'intimité des toilettes à la révolte contre la violation de cette vie privée. Les caméras représentent l'échec de l'école et ceci, soit pour créer l'assistance d'une communauté, soit pour créer un fonctionnement

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> *gendarme* efficace. En conséquence, le film porte un jugement sévère sur l'enseignement dans les écoles secondaires qui ressemble à des forces *gendarmes*.

Each generation portrays in its way the alienating and dehumanizing effect of schools. For Charles Dickens (1954) in the mid-19th century, it was the relentless bullying of Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, whose educational charge was to be the "grim, mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away" (p. 16). A century later, George Leonard (1968) described the soul-numbing routine of school life:

> It is an exacting and exhausting business, this damming up the flood of human potentialities. What energy it takes to make a torrent into a trickle. To train that trickle along narrow, well-marked channels! (p. 1) No need for obscure psychological explanations for modern man's fragmentation; that is what his schools teach. (p. 11)

In the ensuing half-century, some Hollywood movies have taken up the critique of schools as soul-less institutions. Within that large topic, I focus on the portrayal of toilets as the only private space in the school setting, isolated both from the prying eyes of school authorities and the crushing weight of peer-pressure.[1] Harried students (and occasionally teachers) seek out that space as safe haven, but may fall victim to the evil which lurks therein.

The focus of this paper will be the Hollywood movie *Charlie Bartlett* (2008) whose main issue is privacy in the public schools. Therefore, it valorizes the therapeutic value of the anonymity of the toilet stall. However, the film-makers realize that the essence of public schooling cannot be the privy, so I shall also explore how the film moves from illicit activities in the toilet to the sanctioned public domain. I begin with a brief survey – representative, not exhaustive – of toilet scenes in school movies, both violent and benign.

Violence in the John

Fuller (1993) gives a feminist overview of "Men's Rooms in American Popular Film":

> The men's room in film has become the locus where any number of themes are revealed: secrecy for self and/or with others, privacy to "do one's thing" – whether to do drugs or seek solace, humorous plot conventions, power plays, war wrangling, sheer comraderie, even murder ... one can see support for the argument that men's rooms might truly be the last bastion for masculinity. (p. 229)

Fuller's characterization of the men's movie toilet in general is broadly accurate for the toilet scenes in school movies, which generally transpire in one of three types of high schools: suburban schools, minority schools, or upper-class private schools. I address the first two, then turn to private schools as the exception which proves the rule.

My Bodyguard (1980) traces the travails of a tenth grade boy who leaves his private school and enrolls in public high school. In the bathroom, he is shaken down by the class bully and his henchmen for protection money, as are all the other "small fries" in the school. Intervention by adults only makes things worse. *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996) is a thoroughly anti-establishment independent film which trashes suburban life, both family and junior high-school, with no hope of redemption. The female protagonist is terrorized psychologically in the girl's toilet by another girl, who warns her to stay away from her putative boyfriend.

Turning to minority schools, the opening scene of *Lean on Me* (1989) shows a male student beating a teacher unconscious in the cafeteria while violence among women is slightly more restrained: a group of black girls attacks a white girl in the toilet, ripping her blouse off. She seeks help by running into the crowded hallway. *American History X* (1998) deals with racial tension in a mixed suburban neighborhood. It opens with a beating in the bathroom and closes with the only bathroom murder in a school movie. In *Save the Last Dance* (2001), Sara is a rare white face in a South Side Chicago public school. She happens on a black hood shaking down a terrified girl in the women's bathroom. When Sara attempts to intercede, *she's* threatened.

Toilet as Safe Haven

At the other extreme, school toilets are a private place for deviant behavior[2] or just to be alone. In *Heathers* (1988), the toilet is where the girls are free to indulge their bulimia, thanks to its privacy and its facilities. In *Mean Girls* (2004), a toilet stall is the only place Cady can find a seat to eat her lunch on her first day in a new high school. As the cafeteria is clique territory, there are no seats available for the unaffiliated. *Half Nelson* (2006), an independent film, has a junior high student discover her history teacher smoking crack in a girls bathroom stall, after hours. In *Saved!* (2004), that Mary relieves her morning sickness in the toilet is unremarkable. But that is how her pregnancy is discovered by a classmate, and their ensuing heart-to-heart talk could

only take place in the intimacy of the john, as the film is set in American Eagle Christian High School where pre-marital sex, let alone teen pregnancy, is verboten even as a topic of discussion (Resnick, 2011).

Exceptions Which Prove the Rule

In some movies, bathrooms are visible by their absence. *The Breakfast Club* (1985), given over in its entirety to the psychological brutality of Saturday morning detention in a suburban high school, has no need to hide brutality in the bathroom. The same is true for the Ur-violent (minority) school movie, *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) set in the all-boys "Manual Arts High School." There, the entire school is an ongoing rumble (Golub, 2009), including the attempted rape of a woman teacher in the library. The violent showdown between the protagonist teacher and a knife-wielding student takes place in the middle of class, not in some dimly-lit hallway. There is a brief confrontation in the bathroom at the beginning of the film, before viewers are aware of the full extent of school violence and terror, not at all limited to the toilets. In *Stand and Deliver* (1988), rival Chicano gangs rumble in the school yard during recess, so no need to sequester violence in the bathrooms.

On the other hand, private-school movies (e.g., *Scent of a Woman*, 1992) have no bathroom scenes, because there is no shortage of private space on their lush campuses. Students live in semi-private dorm rooms, which are never subject to search in these honorable institutions, for example, Sedgewick's trunk of forbidden treasures (pornographic magazines, cigarettes, etc.) in *The Emperor's Club* (2002) or illicit smoking in *Dead Poets Society* (1989). The same is true for Charlie Bartlett's room in Castlewood, the prep school from which he is expelled. Which is not to say that private schools are portrayed positively in the movies, quite the opposite (Resnick, 2000); but access to private *space* is not the problem. Even in the classic *Dead Poets Society*, the group leaves campus for their nighttime rendezvous because it is forbidden, not because there is not ample private space on school grounds.

Before offering an analysis of school toilet scenes in *Charlie Bartlett*, I begin with a precis of the film.

Precis of Charlie Bartlett (CB)

Charlie is a cross between the naive Forest Gump and the scheming Ferris Bueller. The film opens with Charlie being expelled from his upper-crust Connecticut prep school for manufacturing fraudulent ID

cards in his dorm room, which he sold to eager classmates. He explains to his mother (in the privacy of their chauffeured limo) why he did it: "*They were just starting to appreciate me. I was the guy everyone wanted to meet.*" Already expelled from many other private schools, the only alternative for Charlie is a suburban public school. Rejecting his mother's offer for the chauffeur to drive him to school on his first day, Charlie rides the school bus dressed in his prep school jacket and tie, attaché case in hand. Only losers ride the bus, but Charlie befriends amiable Len the Hulk, one of the special education kids. Charlie's alien appearance provokes a variety of responses at the new school, including from attractive Susan who mistakes him for a teacher. When Charlie enters the "Boys Restroom," we see tall Murphy (a hard-core punk, complete with Mohawk haircut, leather jacket, etc.) selling pot to his sidekick. Murphy's reaction to Charlie's costume: "*Is he like a total faggot, or what?*" Murphy is offended by Charlie's airs, strong-arms him into a toilet stall, and holds his head under the water. The Principal happens by the restroom and inquires, "*What have we here?*" to which Murphy responds, "*Just messing around.*" Murphy is sent back to class but whispers a parting threat to Charlie, "*Later, homo.*"

There are no scenes of classroom instruction in *CB*, so we cut immediately to the standard lunch scene. Charlie naively sits down to eat at the cheerleader clique table, all of whom stand up and walk away. Charlie invites Len to join him – to the shocked notice of all the normal onlookers – and the approval of Susan. At the end of the school day, Murphy attacks Charlie in a deserted hallway, while his sidekick videotapes the beating, taunting him with "*Hey Charlie, what's Latin for 'I'm a total pussy'*?" When Charlie's mom spots his black eye, rather than have him return to school, she sends him to Dr. Weathers, the on-call family psychiatrist. On the couch, Charlie mentions in passing that he has occasional trouble concentrating in class, for which the doctor immediately prescribes Ritalin. Charlie increases the daily dose per the doctor's instructions which leads him to freak out, running naked through the neighborhood. Charlie stops the medication, retaining almost a full bottle of pills.

As luck would have it, Susan's father is the school Principal. Susan and Charlie become involved, partly because they are both only-children with well-meaning, but dysfunctional, single-parents. Charlie's mom gets through the day on white wine and tranquilizers while her husband serves a long prison sentence for income tax evasion, to Charlie's deep

chagrin. Susan reports that it is the job which has turned her Principal/father into an alcoholic.

A school-wide assembly has been called at which the administration announces policy on two[3] issues of privacy. The Principal states matter-of-factly that "*the student lounge will be closed on Monday while we install security cameras,*" provoking student displeasure. After school, Charlie has hired Len to strong-arm Murphy into the limousine where Charlie gives his pop-psychological analysis of Murphy's hostility, which softens him somewhat. Charlie initially proposes friendship but "*maybe we'll just have to settle for being business partners,*" proposing that Murphy sell Charlie's leftover Ritalin at the upcoming school dance, splitting the profits. The successful sales effort makes Charlie an instant hero among the students. Subsequently, Kip, who is painfully introverted, approaches Charlie in the school hallway:

Kip: *You think there is any way we could talk, in private?*

Charlie: *Sure.* (Glancing about, he escorts Kip into the "Boy's Restroom".)

Kip: *Is it true that you can get a hold of medication?* (Proceeds to describe the physical symptoms of his panic attacks.) *I think it's mental but I can't go to my parents about it 'cause they already think I'm a freak'.*

Charlie promises to help and does so by presenting Kip's symptoms as his own to Dr. Weathers, thereby securing an appropriate prescription. Charlie has a follow-up meeting with Kip in the restroom, but this time they sit in adjoining stalls. In addition to prescribing the drugs, Charlie also delivers advice and support, ending with, "*Same time, next week.*" Murphy waits near the bathroom sinks to fill Charlie's prescriptions and act as cashier. A series of six quick sessions follow, in which boys and girls share their problems with Charlie, who sits in an adjoining stall. Charlie repeats their symptoms to half-a-dozen different psychologists outside school, to get drugs. The next day, Charlie (now dressing like a cool drug dealer) enters the toilet – newly labeled with a handwritten sign, "Boy's Pharmacy" – while a long line of "patients" waits in the hallway.

Charlie's next adventure is to hawk a DVD ("Charlie Bartlett Productions") of Murphy's school fights, rebating part of the profits to the victims as restitution. Confronted by the Principal and Superintendent about the DVD, Charlie is suspended for three days, during which time Kip attempts suicide. Principal Gardner questions

Charlie about his distributing drugs, which begins to change Charlie's world view.

Principal: *Why are you doing this?*

Charlie: *I'm really happy here. For the first time everybody likes me.*

Principal: *There are more important things.*

Charlie: *I know everybody keeps saying that, but I'm 17 and popularity is pretty damn important.*

Principal: *There are more important things.*

Charlie: *Like what?*

Principal: *Like what you do with the popularity. What you do in this life matters.*

Charlie visits the recuperating Kip at home and agrees (selflessly) to try and produce Kip's controversial play, "Hell Comes with Your Own Locker." Returning to school, Charlie announces to the students that there will be no more drug sales. When he offers free consultations instead, the length of the waiting line doubles.

Turning to the confrontation over security cameras in the student lounge, a student activist advises Charlie that "*the Board completely ignored the petition to get the cameras out of the lounge so they completely blew us off. Next thing you know they'll put in metal detectors and start doing random locker searches. We need to do something. We need you man.*" Charlie begs-off getting involved, so the student begins a solo demonstration ("This is a school, not a prison") which attracts a large number of protestors bearing signs like "Our Lounge, Our Rights".

Superintendent: *Cameras, protests, insubordinate kids. Would any of this have happened without Charlie Bartlett? He's all I hear about these days. "Charlie Bartlett told my son this. Charlie Bartlett told my daughter to do that." Our lives would be a whole lot easier if we just expelled him.*

Principal: *Do you really think that's what he deserves?*

Superintendent: *Do yourself a favor, don't get fired over this kid.*

The Principal warns the protestors to disperse within two minutes or be suspended, but they stand fast. Charlie arranges for the crowd to disperse, asking them to regroup that evening, when he confesses his own inadequacies: "*You guys don't need me. ... You need to stop listening to me and stop listening to the people telling you who you should be and*

stop listening to the people telling you you're not good enough to do the things you want to do. You guys have all the answers."

Police arrive and arrest Charlie, while the kids trash the lounge and the cameras. The Superintendent fires the Principal. Charlie goes to Susan's home to invite her father (the Principal) to attend the premiere of Kip's play, in which Susan stars. The father is drunk and has a handgun, which he fires several times. "*Everybody needs to vent a little now and again. Some of us are privileged enough to vent to you in the Boys Room stall. The rest of us just have to settle for less conventional methods like a bottle of booze and a handgun.*" Charlie tries to rescue the father from himself, they reconcile, and go to the play together. *Denouement*: The fired Principal returns to teaching AP history to his own enjoyment and his class's. Charlie applies for a summer internship at a prestigious psychiatric institute.

Charlie Bartlett – The Bathroom at Center Stage

No school movie, perhaps no Hollywood film altogether, has given so much screen time to the toilet as does *Charlie Bartlett*, as well as making it a central part of the plot.[4] The teens desperately want a confidential, authoritative sounding-board for their developmental crises, one which can also offer them practical help, like drugs. The kids' alienation from the adult generation at home ("*I'm so sick of my parents*" is the bit of teen chatter we hear at school lunch) holds true at school, too. There is no adult in whom students can confide, not even for kids in crisis, like Kip – neither trusted teacher nor guidance counselor.[5] Instead, Charlie's toilet drop-in counseling center meets their needs. At the center of the film is the standard teen preoccupation with how achieving a unique self can nonetheless allow for social acceptance. From the societal perspective, the film raises the issue of individual rights versus social stability. The toilet is the physical nexus for these two issues.

The undisputed privacy of the toilet stands in counterpoint to the public struggle over the privacy of the student lounge. These two sites are related chiastically. The bathroom changes from a scene of violence and confrontation to a place of dialogue and healing. At the same time, the student lounge morphs from a refuge to a battlefield. The final status of both sites in the film is not made explicit, but we assume that the cameras do not return to the lounge and that Charlie no longer holds

court in the bathroom. Why the plot necessarily follows these arcs is the question to which I now turn.

Leaving the Toilet

Charlie Bartlett conforms to Schatz's (1981) genre of social integration films, which:

> Trace the integration of the central characters into the community. ... Their personal and social conflicts are internalised, translated into emotional terms, with their interpersonal antagonism eventually yielding to the need for a well-ordered community. (p. 34)

The portrayal of conflict and alienation in the school films cited at the beginning of the paper takes place (at least partly) in the toilet, but the resolution of the crisis – reestablishing the well-ordered community Hollywood represents and celebrates – can only take place outside the toilet, in public space. *CB* well portrays that process, as it has Charlie exploit the privacy of the toilet for confidential, therapeutic relationships, over against parents and their *loco parentis*, the school and its authorities. Charlie's integration into normative school society takes place not in the toilet, but at the school play, where he is just one of the audience. He did not hustle the play, but helped to produce it *via* the sanctioned Drama Club, as the Principal directed. Moreover, Charlie acted to help a fellow loner, but not with a pilfered prescription or bogus therapy. Hollywood's closing message to the teen audience is that you can best be your individual self *via* sanctioned school roles and activities, a stance which gives social integration films their name.

Domestic tranquility is restored by the social rehabilitation of the four alienated characters. Charlie has foresworn his maverick ways, trading in drug-dealing and rabble-rousing for a professional career track. Murphy is de-punked, channeling his excess emotional energy into acting and discovering that clean-cut is the way to the girl of his dreams. Kip stops being a suicidal misfit, once his alienation is repackaged as artistic angst. The Principal escapes the clutches of the educational establishment not by fleeing the school system, but by becoming one of its drones. While he returns to a role he personally enjoys, that is just the friendly face of the establishment which rewards obeisance with self-fulfillment.

Finally, Fuller's (1993) assertion ("Men's rooms – the last bastion for masculinity") from nearly a generation ago no longer seems apt. While gender issues are one theme in *CB*,[6] Charlie's use of a toilet stall as a

therapeutic site is trans-gendered, as at least five women feel free to use the "Boy's Bathroom" to that end. For example,

Woman student: *[Should I] get breast implants? A lot of my friends are getting them.*

Charlie: *That's up to you, but speaking as a guy, it's kind of a turn-off when a girl's not cool with being herself.*

While Murphy's initial reading of Charlie in that same bathroom was as "a total faggot" (precipitating his macho attack), the film promotes overcoming gender (and other) stereotypes, and the toilet is one central site of that work.

Privacy in the Student Lounge

Once Charlie changes life course and leaves the toilet behind, the struggle over privacy moves to the issue of cameras in the student lounge. At the school assembly, the Principal announces matter-of-factly that "*The student lounge will be closed on Monday while we install security cameras.*"

Student A: *How can you do that, that's like invasion of privacy.*

Principal: *It's a liability issue and anyway I'm afraid the Board has already passed the motion.*

Student B: *But the student lounge is the only place we can hang out without teachers. Are there cameras in the teachers lounge?*

Murphy: *This is total absolute bullshit.*[7]

Students perceive their lounge as an anonymous space, even if not totally private. Exempt from adult supervision and the norms of public places (Student B's claim), behavior forbidden – or at least frowned upon – in supervised school space flourishes in the lounge, for example, a couple very visibly "making out." As semi-private space, students feel no need to take into account that there might be modest or lonely students (like Kip, who hasn't *spoken to a girl since third grade*) who would feel embarrassed or left out by the necking.

To be sure, the Principal's unilateral announcement is not framed in a way to smooth a change in public policy, as he initially offers no justification. Indeed, the school is definitely not a *polis*, as neither the Principal nor Superintendent feels the need to involve students in formulating a policy which affects their lives. The anemic political life of the school well reflects the current conception of what it means to be

a citizen, and therefore the minimal effort needed to educate to that office:

> We have come to think of citizens primarily as the bearers of rights – rights moreover that run mostly against the various organs of government, but also against our neighbors ... to the extent that citizens, conceived simply as the bearers of rights, become active agents, their activity will be aimed primarily at defending their protected status, that is defending their rights ... not so much at advancing the common good. (Green, 1999, p. 168)

Advancing the common good of the school – from stopping Murphy's violence to main-streaming the special ed kids socially – was not on the agenda of the school community. However, students were eager to protect their rights, ultimately resorting to violence.

Green (1999) claims that stable societies need to be *self*-monitored, which occurs only as individuals internalize the shared norms of social life. Instead, the film would have us rely on the innate goodness of individuals (or at least teenagers) rather than socialization, as Susan sings in her solo at the conclusion of Kip's play:

> *If you want to sing out, sing out.*
> *If you want to be free, be free.*
> *There's a million ways to go. You know that there are.*
> *You can do what you want, the opportunities are.*
> *And if you find a new way, you can do it today.*

Individualism joins privacy as an inalienable student right.

Yet for Hollywood, violent student protest in public and illicit drugs in private must ultimately yield to acceptable social activities (like the school play), which are portrayed as offering genuine human fulfillment.[8] The movie flirts with illicit forms of catharsis, but ends with a very traditional, socially-accepted view of the good life.[9]

CB presents the conventional adolescent conflict between individual identity and the demands of society, in its primary incarnations as parents and school. The film lets the students win some battles (like trashing the cameras), but society wins the war. In the end, *CB* is a corporate – not an independent – film.

Privacy Misunderstood

"The right to privacy" is socially-constructed and often socially-legislated. As a matter of law, Student A (quoted above) is wrong: a public school is a *public* domain, in which privacy is not a right. Even the public part of school bathrooms (the sink area, as opposed to the stalls), is open to electronic surveillance. It is in that area that most of the mischief happens in the movies, and in real life.

> Where surveillance cameras monitor public areas of a school, they have been held justified because students cannot expect privacy in a public area. Similar reasoning was endorsed when a court in 1981 found a Michigan school justified in installing a two-way mirror and camera in a boys' rest room, which subsequently identified students engaged in a marijuana sale. In *Stern* v. *New Haven Community Schools*, the court found that a student's right to privacy had to be balanced with the school's need to maintain an appropriate school environment and that the camera's limited view of the rest room was not a substantive invasion of the student's privacy. (Hinchey, 2001, p. 56)

The Common School's Last Hurrah

Perhaps only Hollywood still believes in the power of the common school to unify a pluralist American society. *CB* takes two characters from the opposite poles of American society – upper-crust, passive-aggressive Charlie and working class, homophobic Murphy – and has them meet in the school toilet, literally the underside of American life. Later, in Charlie's limo:

Charlie: *I want to be your friend.*

Murphy: *Guys like you and guys like me can't be friends.*

Charlie: *Why's that?*

Murphy: *I take the train tracks home; you drive around in a limo.*

Rather than friends, they initially join economic forces in a series of scams, and then are gradually reshaped as solid, middle-class citizens. The movie abets teen fantasies about what it would be like to be really rich or really bad, but in the end convinces the two mavericks that there is no class like the middle class. That it does so by homogenizing diverse life styles rather than encouraging respect for diversity is grounds for less than a full endorsement of Hollywood's view of public schooling. Still, as Gilmore (2002) points out for the hero of *Trainspotting* (1996) – and the stunning toilet scene therein – "the adoption of bourgeois, capitalist dreams might be just the right *pharmakon* for a repeat heroin

addict" (p. 83). Charlie and Murphy are both repeat (drug) offenders, so the middle class – and its premier institution, the public school – could be a fine half-way house for them as they each construct more positive individual and social personae. This process is represented by their move out of the bathroom,[10] and into the mainstream.

On the other hand, the school is portrayed as an anemic public institution. In the assembly, a school flag is barely visible and there is no state or United States flag. There is no opening hymn or other ritual, just some caustic words from the Principal. The trashing of the student lounge and its cameras are portrayed as an heroic popular uprising, hardly a lesson in respect for public property, the rule of law, or tradition (the lounge is a gift of "Western Summit [High School] Alumni 1983"). We're given the impression that no one will be prosecuted for the riot: "*There will be an investigation but since all the cameras were destroyed, they'll have a hard time figuring out who did what,*" says a police officer. Unfortunately, the public powers that be (Principal and Superintendent) show no civic leadership in opening a dialogue with the students in the arts of shaping school policy.

Until the installation of the security cameras, the school never intruded on private student life, but then it exercised little authority in any direction. Though it was probably his own personal style rather than school policy, the Principal announces from the hallway his impending entry to the boys bathroom with the words, "*No smokes. Cigarettes out.*" So the school rule against smoking is explicitly winked at. Indeed, the Superintendent sacks the Principal because, from the very beginning, he criticized him for not commanding the respect of the students. What precisely "command respect" means is central to the film, both for adults and teens. These are issues which Hollywood loves to raise, but rarely takes the time to address seriously, making do with an unsympathetic portrayal of the Superintendent, the highest authority figure around.

The school takes an individualist stance which resonates with the teen audience, rather than promoting any kind of public consciousness.

> Because of the radical pluralism that characterizes modern society, a necessary condition of individuals' becoming a "people" or "public" is that they be able to identify – and to identify with – a shared communal space or institution. It is out of the common commitment to the visible, even physical, institutions of public life that citizens come to tolerate each others' private differences. Children, as future citizens, develop these attachments best within the context of a

> public school that models in miniature this national public square. (Levinson, 2002, p. 114)

Yet we have no sense that this school – as a public institution – makes any effort at educating for the values needed for even its own domestic tranquility. Bullying, drug-dealing, and the marginalizing of the special education kids all proceed without being noticed by the administration. The students covet their private spaces – the toilet and the lounge – while the school does nothing to promote any attachment to the public. Instead, the movie reinforces Levinson's concern that public schools may "violate individuals' identity coherence [while also] fostering a public square characterized by civic instability and identity politics as opposed to democratic virtue and civic identification" (p. 122). Indeed, most of the film parades the success of Charlie's identity politics and dis-establishmentarianism which result in civic instability. In the end, Charlie is de-fanged as the price of his entering the public sphere, just as Levinson feared.

The movie's ambivalence about how much individualism to foster in the school setting accords well with Levinson's comparative analysis, placing America mid-way between England and France on the extent to which schools should educate for private, rather than civic, identity. She sees English schools as "functioning almost as an extension of the child's private upbringing as opposed to establishing a rigidly differentiated public space or institution" (2002, p. 111), as in France. On the one hand, Susan is belting out "*You can do what you want*" as the film's theme song and Charlie is paradoxically urging the crowd to ignore him by taking his advice to heed themselves, not others. On the other hand, the film supports the squelching of both Charlie's and Murphy's individuality as the price of stable civic life. Thus, *CB* well reflects – even if inadvertently – the unresolved conflicts of the American common school.

Conclusion

Ellsworth (2005) affirms the potential educative role of media:

> They put diverse and occasionally warring ideas, identities, sensibilities, traditions – and people – into relation with each other, actually or imaginatively. Media thus are imbued with the potential for catalyzing new forms of corporeality, new embodiments, new ways of knowing and being human. (p. 126)

There is that potential in independent films, but corporate, genre films by their very nature educate for the status quo. *Charlie Bartlett*

accurately portrays the alienation rife in some of today's high schools. It is innovative in bestowing therapeutic value on the privacy of the school toilet, as antidote to the alienation. It is sinister in how it uses those assets as a come-on to educate for thoroughly conventional values. Few films so convincingly justify Blum's (1999) project to "cast a critical eye on these images that exert such influence over the American public" (p. 130).

NOTES

1. Bathrooms have received passing attention in the scholarly school literature. "Sandy had finally gotten to school, but she wasn't in class; she was 'walking through halls, avoiding narks, hiding in the bathroom stalls crying.' " (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 3). At the opposite extreme, in the straight-laced, fundamentalist Christian school "Bethany Baptist Academy –BBA" (Peshkin, 1986, p.145):

> In response to my question, "What do students do at school that is most fun?" students describe their bathroom mischief: "We may sucker the teachers to get out of class so we can roam around. We'll give an excuse like going to the bathroom. If you go to the bathroom, you can write things on the walls in those little pews, little things, nothing cool. Acting wild – it gets you through the day." Some of the worst "little things" students write on the bathroom walls are: "Roses are red. Toilets are white. If you eat beans. You'll be here all night."

So much for mischief at BBA, but still, the bathroom is where they can do it. As BBA is a small school, "the dynamics of smallness operate [including] the difficulty students have in finding isolation or invisibility" (p. 148) – except in the bathroom.

2. A recent United States Supreme Court case (*Safford Unified School District v. Redding, 08-479*) addresses the legality of strip-searching a junior high student on suspicion of her possessing and distributing prescription drugs. While that case (which deals with privacy of person, not place) is not directly relevant to *Charlie Bartlett,* the basis for initial suspicion about the student is relevant: "staff members had identified Savana and Marissa as part of an unusually rowdy group at the school's opening dance in August, during which alcohol and cigarettes were found in the girls' bathroom" (p. 2).

3. The movie neatly side-steps the other hot-topic of student privacy/freedom – the use of mobile phones in school. When the Superintendent stands to explain the school mobile policy, Charlie slips out and activates the fire alarm, ending the presentation before it can begin. The one brief classroom scene we are shown focuses on Charlie's passing an old-fashioned note to Susan, rather than an SMS, even though we see

Susan's mobile open on her desk. Charlie does not seem to own a mobile, nor does anyone else ever use one on school grounds.

4. It is not a coincidence that Charlie's use of parallel stalls resembles a confessional, a veiled assertion that therapy has replaced religion in the search for the meaning of life, with drugs relieving the pain until meaning is found.

5. Contrast the genre of movies where the teacher-confidante is the hero (e.g., *Dead Poets Society, Stand & Deliver*, and *Dangerous Minds*, among others).

6. *CB* is a "guy" high school movie, paralleling the many "gal" high school movies: *Saved, Mean Girls, Pretty Persuasion*, and so on..

7. Ironically, the security cameras were needed at *other* campus locations, the deserted ones where Murphy himself beat students, unbeknownst to school authorities.

8. Hollywood pats itself on the back in *CB*, as theater is the humanizing power which is both the tool and ultimate symbol of the makeover, not just for Charlie and Murphy, but also for Kip, Susan, and her father. Corporate Hollywood is on firm classical ground in this regard, as Plato allowed "the necessary conscription of the artists to the service of the state in even the ideal city because not all people will be able to be guided by their internal source of reason, and no people will be able to as children" (Gilmore, 2002, p. 81).

9. *CB* is true to the unwritten rule that movie heroes must themselves conform to accepted social norms. Susan neither seeks (nor receives) drugs during her bathroom confessional with Charlie. Her addiction is cigarettes, from which Charlie tries to wean her, using nicotine patches he purchased at a pharmacy. Charlie himself, after his brief authorized fling with Ritalin, never uses drugs.

10. This is not the place to explore the larger cultural meanings of toilets (see Yaron, 2005), nor how they relate to drug use. These two themes intersect in *CB*, both Murphy's initial use of the bathroom, to market marijuana and Charlie's subsequent use of the same space to market prescription forms of mind-alteration. Richard Gilmore (2002) analyzes these meanings as they arise from the toilet scene in the film *Trainspotting*, including the narcotic effect of middle class life.

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