Film Images of Private Schools

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The public debate over private education is examined in one of its most influential forms, the Hollywood dramatic feature film. The four recent films highlighting private schools portray them as homogeneously negative, even on those dimensions which private schools feel themselves strongest, for example, effective leadership, parental involvement, and character education. While films also portray public schools critically, minority schools show dramatic improvement, by dint of hard work alone. By contrast, private schools are portrayed as socially divisive, unchangeable, and opposed to change. This negative portrayal may be an important component of the "ordinary knowledge" which underlies policy decisions.

Le débat public sur l'éducation privée est étudié sous une de ses formes les plus importantes, le film dramatique Hollywoodien. Quatre films récents sur les écoles privées illustrent l'éducation privée négativement, même sur des points dont ces écoles estiment leurs forces, par exemple, la direction efficace, la participation des parents et l'établissement de réputation. Alors que les films illustrent également les écoles publiques négativement, les écoles minoritaires démontrent une amélioration dramatique à force seulement de travail. Contrairement, les écoles privées sont illustrées comme semant socialement le désaccord, inchangeables et opposées au changement. Ce portrait négatif est peut être une composante importante à la "connaissance ordinaire" qui souligne les prises de décisions sur les lignes directrices.

The debate over the role of private schools in improving American education continues (Gamoran,1996). In this paper I examine how private schools are portrayed in Hollywood dramatic feature films.

That portrayal may be an important part of the "ordinary knowledge" (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979) which forms the backdrop against which the policy debate is conducted, because most educational policymakers – legislators and school board members, for example – attended public schools, as did the majority of the American people. The vacuum of first-hand experience about private schools is easily filled by the media: "The movies have always done a remarkable job in creating a type of visual public 'consensus' ... the collective vision we all have of things about which we know very little" (Jowett & Linton, 1980, p. 75).

The four films analyzed here are the most prominent recent dramatic films which focus on private schools and all of them portray the schools negatively. That negative portrayal of private education is the mirror image of how private education understands itself and therefore, to some extent, how it may be "in fact." On the other hand, film representation of public schools is more optimistic, as we shall see. Finally, while on the surface the films totally negate the value of private schooling, some critics (Giroux, 1993) see the structure of the films recuperating the critique, thereby affirming racist, sexist, and cultural domination. This phenomenon will be explored in one of the films, *Dead Poets Society*.

My focus is on the image of private schools presented to the film audience, not an analysis of the myriad forces which shape the film product nor an empirical assessment of the impact of viewing these particular films. I begin with a brief sketch of each film, followed by the composite image of private schools they present. This article is one of a series exploring the film images of American education (Resnick 1996, 1997a, 1997b).

Four Films of Private Education

A Little Princess (1995)

This is a film with a long pedigree. Originally a 19th century novel set in London, it was a Mary Pickford silent film in 1917 and a Shirley Temple vehicle in 1939. The current version sets the action in Manhattan during World War I, but reflects the values and issues of the 1990s (Carnes, 1995). The tale transpires in "Miss Minchin's Seminary for Girls" which has the air of a secular

convent: meals taken in silence, starched uniforms, and its many rules "strictly enforced." Miss Minchin is the malevolent "mother superior" who nonetheless provides the kind of upper-class finishing school education sought by the parents of the young girls entrusted to her. The classical curriculum (French and Latin) includes a strong dose of culture and character education. The educational tone is Gradgrindian, with Miss Minchin declaring at one point "no more make-believe in this school," in response to the heroine's (Sara) enchanting fairy tales.

The school's values reflect the classist, racist bias of elite White society. Hence, the girls are forbidden to talk to the black scullery maid, Becky. The plot turns on economic issues. Sara has been the "princess" of the school because her father (called away to war) has paid for the very best lodging, clothes, birthday parties, and so on. When he is presumed dead and his assets evaporate, Minchin seizes the opportunity to give Sara her comeuppance. This is private-enterprise education at its most heartless: "everything you own now belongs to me, because of the financial burdens you've incurred." Sara is demoted to scullery maid and deprived of every shred of personal identity.

The fairy-tale resolution of this harsh situation is classic "measure for measure:" Sara and Becky become *nouveau riche* best friends liberated from the Seminary; Miss Minchin is apprenticed to a boy chimney sweep (the double whammy of being working class *and* enslaved to a kid), and the Seminary itself is renamed a *school*, recast in a rosy, progressive mode.

Scent of a Woman (1992)

Set during the Bush administration, *Scent* is the ultimate anti-private school film, and not only because of the gross miscarriage of school justice which is the film's climax (as in *School Ties*, below). The film contrasts life in the fancy, New England Baird School (all-male, all-white) with the real education you can get on a weekend in New York City. Because the film is set in "real time," the portrayal of such all-white schools is anachronistic. The deliberate debunking of private schools can be traced to the fact that *Scent* credits its roots in the 1974 Italian film *Profumo Di Donna*. But that film has no school footage at all, only the Italian

parallel of the pilgrimage to New York. Thus, the corrupt Baird School is a total invention of the American film makers.

We are never shown any teaching or studying at Baird, because the real curriculum is to coddle its privileged youngsters into assuming their "rightful" place as the leaders of the next generation. The dramatic crisis of the film focuses on whether the full weight of the school's authority can force its one underprivileged, though saintly and scholarly senior (Charlie, from Oregon) to reveal the identity of classmates whose prank publicly humiliated the headmaster, Trask. This weighty moral issue cannot be worked through on campus, as Trask himself has offered Charlie the bribe of a full scholarship to Harvard, if he will snitch.

The unlikely foil to the venal Trask is Frank Slade (Lt. Col. US Army, Retired), a refugee from LBJ's Great Society who accidentally blinded himself after repeatedly being passed over for promotion during Republican administrations. Slade is Charlie's mentor for the liberating weekend in New York, the blind philosopher whose Socratic dialogues help Charlie clarify the moral dilemma he faces. In the end, though, it is Charlie who saves Slade, paving the way for Slade's redeeming them both.

School Ties (1992)

The film is set in 1955, nearly two generations earlier than its production, in order to address the evils of blatant anti-Semitism at St. Matthew's, "the finest [all male, all white] preparatory school in the nation" then in its 193rd term. David Greene, a star Jewish quarterback from working class Scranton is recruited to spend his senior year at St. Matthew's in order to ensure a winning football season, thereby placating the disgruntled alumni ("there is no column in the record books for moral victories"). Greene's coach cautions him not to reveal more of his background than necessary because St. Matthew's students "are privileged – they take a lot of things for granted."

The official school line is enunciated by the headmaster at the term's opening church service:

> You, my boys, are among the elite of the nation and we strive here at St. Matthew's to prepare you for the heavy responsibility that comes with favored position. Today

> more than ever, this country needs an elite that cares more for honor than for advantage, more for service than for personal gain.

However, the privileged students put their personal agenda ahead of the country's. Mack fails a French test and has a nervous breakdown because he thinks the failure ends his chances to get into Harvard. Troubled by these events, another of the young princes remarks that

> Good grades, the right schools, the right colleges, the right connections – those are the keys to the kingdom. None of us ever goes off and lives by his wits. We do the things they tell us to do and they give us the good life. Goddamn hope we like it when we get it.

Yet the film's critique is not primarily of the students, but of the prejudiced WASP society which has created St. Matthew's in its own image. The only service the school honors is protecting its own. The headmaster taunts Greene for playing football on Rosh Hashanah: "Was it worth it breaking a tradition just to win a football game?" Later, when Greene confronts the headmaster for his failure to fully enforce the school's "cherished Honor Code" which would have been to the detriment of one of the student leaders, the headmaster dissembles with the remark that "tradition is a living, growing thing." David Greene is the archetypal survivor, able to outmaneuver the headmaster and snooty students off the field, as nimbly as he manages the play on the field. He does not as easily overcome losing the WASP princess, who recoils at the very thought she once kissed a Jew (and enjoyed it).

Dead Poets Society (1989)

This widely acclaimed (Academy Award for best original screenplay), commercially successful film is the quintessential portrayal of all that is wrong with private schools. The film retrojects itself to the year 1959, though there is little to mark it off as not contemporary. The early date allows the film to present a lily-white, all-male student body and faculty, a blight which had been eradicated in the private schools of 1989. The film pits the reforming teacher Mr. Keating against the arch-conservative principal and culture of Welton Academy. Keating uses his

literature class to urge his students to "think for yourselves" and "make your lives extraordinary," while the school is parading its banners of "Discipline, Tradition, Honor, Excellence" and the fact that, in its 100th year, it is "the best preparatory school in the United States" with "more than 75% [of our graduates going] on to the Ivy League."

The conflict of values is not confined to instructional issues. The film opens with innocent, weeping young boys being torn from their mothers' arms on the first day of school, and closes with the suicide of Neil Perry, one of the most promising senior students. The school which wreaks this havoc has an odd crest, an "X", which in the film lexicon is the shape Charlie Chaplin used to parody the swastika in *The Great Dictator* (1940). No wonder the students refer to their jerry-built, illegal radio set as "Radio Free America." Whatever freedom and humanity the film portrays necessarily take place off campus, both the Dead Poets Society's subterranean cave (where suppressed human emotion can finally find expression – and girls) and Neil's illicit foray into theater. Indeed, the title of the film (hereafter "*DPS*") communicates the fact that at Welton, all poets will die: either literally, like Neil, or spiritually like the exiled Keating.

Aside from Keating, the adults in the film run from bad to worse. The principal bullies and literally beats his young charges not only into submission, but into betraying one another. The key parent in the film, Neil's father, is one of the most cowing, authoritarian figures in recent film history. His alternative to the "nonsense" Keating has been feeding his son, is to transfer Neil to a military academy. As for Keating, he urges his students to call him "Captain, my captain," the title of Walt Whitman's ode to the slain Lincoln. The reference is deliberate, as the film is set exactly 100 years after the eve of the Civil War and a putative emancipator of the slaves is again at work: "You are not an indentured servant" he tells Neil, who is agonizing over disobeying his father. Keating loses his battle to change Welton, but the 1960s will win the war for those whom he dares to "swim against the stream."

The Film Image of Private Schools

All four of the films just surveyed present a homogeneously negative view of private schools, to the point of caricature. For example, the student newspaper in *DPS* is called *Wealth and Honor*. Eisner's (1997) description of Welton provides a generic summary of all the schools: "the elite character of a venerable school supported by wealthy parents, designed to give their sons all that they need to preserve their class and to realize their destinies" (p. 6). To detail the dimensions of this negative film image, I begin with three categories provided by a proponent of private schools (Conway, 1992, p. 562) in response to the question "what makes private schools work? The answer is simple and can be divided into three factors: effective leadership, small school size, and parent involvement."

Effective Leadership

By effective leadership, Conway means principals and teachers who have the autonomy and take the initiative to make education succeed, unencumbered by absentee bureaucracies or teacher unions. Yet, none of the teachers in these films display the kind of instructional innovation or initiative of which private school proponents are so proud. The teachers in *DPS* (with the exception of Keating, of course) are the very epitome of deadly instruction: slowly declining Latin nouns while mistaking quantity of homework for quality of teaching. The house master/French teacher in *School Ties* is a martinet of the highest order, who precipitates Mack's breakdown through incessant grilling in French grammar. All four headmasters mouth high-minded moral goals, while manipulating those same values and oppressing their students. In *Princess*, Miss Minchin *is* the Wicked Witch of the West.

Small Size and Close-knit Environment

Conway notes small class size which facilitates learning and small school size which "like a closely knit neighborhood – affords a supportive environment for both teachers and students" (p. 563). At the classroom level, these films do conform to this criterion, because small classes are exactly the luxury which old money can

provide. In *Little Princess* the entire *school* is portrayed as one class of about 25 girls. While the private schools all have small classes, the three boys high schools are portrayed as quite large overall with frequent shots of masses of boys streaming to meals or assemblies. All of the schools have a dress code which, along with their large size, reinforces the sense of regimentation and homogenization. At Miss Minchin's Seminary, not only are uniforms required, but "jewelry and such finery are not allowed," especially Sara's locket, epitomizing her personal family attachments. Thus, the films portray school size and environment as a minus, not a plus.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is the backbone of school choice plans, believing that when parents choose a school a mutual bond is formed in the child's interest. In private schools, the parents' financial commitment enhances parental interest and involvement in their child's education. But these films are nearly univocal in their criticism of parents. First, by setting the action in residential schools, the parents have essentially absented themselves. In some cases, it is clear that they have sent their boys to boarding school to be rid of them. After Todd's parents (in *DPS*) send him the same birthday gift two years in a row, he dejectedly observes that "maybe they weren't thinking about anything at all." When parents do appear, they are either authoritarian (like Neil's father in *DPS*, whom he addresses as "Sir") or ineffective (Neil's mother). When Slade (in *Scent*) asserts he is appearing on Charlie's behalf "*in loco parentis,*" we forgive his machination because Charlie has already told us that his father "left" and he despises his stepfather who, in any case, is a continent away.

Usually, the failure of film parents allows a courageous teacher to step into the breach. Consodine observes that

> The sustained failure of the film families, particularly throughout the fifties and sixties, opened the way for ... the emergence of the teacher-hero, in which the teacher, operating as parent surrogate, sought to redress the problems caused by parental neglect and failure. (1985, p. 113)

While this analysis is accurate for teachers in films of public education, there are no successful teacher-heroes in private schools. Keating makes a half-hearted attempt to champion his students' cause, but is bested by the system. In *Scent*, Slade is the hero, because no educator on-campus is worthy. When the Student-Faculty Disciplinary committee (which includes the only two females/teachers we see at Baird) returns a unanimous "not guilty" verdict for Charlie, the student body cheers the headmaster's failure. But as the camera pans over the faculty seated in the front section of the hall, we see glum faces. For the filmmaker, there is not even a single, senior/male faculty member committed to justice and due process, who sympathized with the torpedoing of the headmaster's attempted subversion of justice. Only *Little Princess* presents a father (though no educator) truly devoted to his daughter's well-being, but the plot turns on his absence.

Curriculum Innovation and Character Education

Kane (1991) asserts that teachers in private schools play a large role in curriculum design. While such curricula are often unabashedly college preparatory, independent schools claim to put a strong emphasis on all-around character education, not just academics. Yet Keating is chastised by the headmaster for making changes in the set curriculum. The curricula portrayed in the films are largely college preparatory, with extra-curricular time given over to sports (emphasizing competitiveness and discipline), rather than other kinds of enrichment. Neil was to have been assistant yearbook editor at Welton, but his father forces him to drop the activity in favor of more study time.

As for character education, the private schools are portrayed as the enemies of character. In *Scent*, Headmaster Trask rambles on about the Baird tradition, yet Slade correctly calls the school "a rat ship [noun *and* verb], which is killing the very spirit this institution claims it instills." We have already seen the headmaster's stormtrooper tactics in *DPS* and the crisis in the Honor Code in *School Ties*. When Dillon is expelled from St. Matthew's for having violated the Code by cheating on an exam, his words ring true when he says, "I'll still get into Harvard:" school ties take care of their own, regardless of moral worthiness.

In *DPS,* Cameron carries the banner of "Tradition" in the opening scene, so he is the one to libel Keating at the end, to save his own skin and the existing school order. Miss Minchin is the type who gave "law and order" a bad name.

The characteristics discussed thus far are those advanced by the proponents of private schools, yet the films present these characteristics as weaknesses, rather than strengths. How much more telling is the portrayal of characteristics advanced by the critics of private schools.

Unhealthy Competitiveness

School Ties pulls no punches in portraying the high-pressured, prep-school academic grind which leads to Mack's nervous breakdown and the reported suicide of a senior who failed to get into Harvard. Greene's response from his public-school perspective is "if I told any of my friends back home about this they wouldn't believe me, over a failing grade in French."

Divisiveness

The common thread in all these films is the schools' refusal to accommodate outsiders: the Jew Greene in *Ties*; nonconformers Neil and "Nuwanda" (and, for that matter, Keating) in *DPS*; working-class Charlie in *Scent*; and independent Sara in *Princess*. In each case, not only are the school administrations portrayed as manipulative regarding the outsiders, but the patrician student culture is equally intolerant. For example, the students at Baird (in *Scent*) are not only spoiled, they are meanspirited, too. A classmate invites Charlie (who attends the school on scholarship but still has to work to make ends meet) to join an expensive Thanksgiving weekend ski trip at the "discounted" price of $1200, which Charlie declines shamefacedly. When upbraided by a member of the clique for deliberately embarrassing Charlie, the offender responds snootily that "during major holidays it's customary for the lord of the manor to offer drippings to the poor," though there were no drippings at all, just a taunt.

The ultimate intolerance is visible by its absence: there are no minority students at any of the schools, though "the help" are often black. (*Scent* has one token Black student and faculty

member, but you have to watch the film in slow motion to see them.) *Princess* goes out of its way to make this point, since in the original novel and in the 1939 film version Becky the maid is not black. Yet, as has already been mentioned, conjuring the image of contemporary private schools as segregated is anachronistic. The book *Visible Now: Blacks in Private Schools* appeared a year prior to *DPS* (Slaughter & Johnson, 1988) and documents the growing presence of Blacks in private schools since the early 1960s. Minority enrollment in private schools has progressed so far that Afro-American educators have begun to question whether or not it is to their own benefit to attend such schools (Fordham, 1991). All the cinematic private schools are also segregated by gender, but only in *DPS* is this policy challenged, to be brutally squelched by the administration.

In sum, the private schools are portrayed as thoroughly patrician, racist, sexist, and xenophobic, deepening the divisions in American society rather than working to alleviate them (Margonis & Parker, 1995). Where supporters (Deal, 1991) see school traditions and rituals generating a culture of community support for their educational work, the films present a hidden curriculum of cultivating the old-boy network through both meanings of "school ties" (Henry, 1992). In this regard, the artifice of presenting all the schools as residential, when only a small percentage of private schools are so in fact, emphasizes their isolation from mainstream society. Moreover, by explicitly locating all the schools north of the Mason-Dixon line, we are led to speculate on how much worse Southern private schools must be (or, in the alternate, foreclosing the option of marginalizing the schools as Southern). Finally, while the schools are portrayed as havens for the super-wealthy, the facts seem to be that private schools enroll as many underprivileged, as privileged students (especially when Catholic schools are included; Knight, 1997). Before addressing the implications of the negative portrayal of private schools, it is worth pausing to see if public schools in contemporary film are portrayed differently.

Are Public Schools Different?

I have demonstrated that films about private schools consistently portray them as grossly defective, even on those features which

educators in private schools see as their strengths. This conclusion might be mitigated if film portrayal of public schools is also negative. Indeed, recent films about inner-city minority schools present them as battle zones. *Lean on Me* (1989) opens to the song *It's a Jungle* and it is: rape of students, horrific assaults on teachers, rampant drug dealing, and teenage pregnancy. *Dangerous Minds* (1995) adds murder. The first scene in *Stand and Deliver* (1988) shows the school office crudely vandalized and the film also has its share of petty crime, gang violence, and drug use. Unlike the small classes in the private schools, in this barrio school there are not enough chairs for all the students in the disheveled classrooms.

Even where race is not an issue in the urban schools, as in *My Bodyguard* (1980), the essence of the plot is the need for a bodyguard to avoid being shaken-down on campus by school hoodlums. The portrayal of public schools in the white suburbs is no better. *The Breakfast Club* (1985) is a harrowing revelation of the dark underside of suburban school life, focusing on the dynamics among five students sentenced to Saturday morning detention. The teacher supervising the detention is every bit as vicious as the worst of the private school headmasters we have encountered. Only *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995) offers some respite from the total trashing of the public schools, though it too portrays their decline in recent years, largely due to government cutbacks.

While the film portrayal of *all* schools is negative, the message about public schools is that while they may be in ruins, they can be saved, if they are *minority* schools. In *Lean on Me*, the crusading principal Joe Clark saves Eastside High, and his entrance into the school is portrayed as a brave sheriff (a black man dressed in white) striding into an evil town. He battles apathetic parents, student drug dealers, and the town bureaucracy. In *Stand and Deliver*, the almost-martyred Jaime Escalante is the ultimate teacher-hero, not only winning over skeptical students and their parents, but also besting the racist ETS and, by ripple effect, sprucing up the whole school. *Dangerous Minds* is stamped from the same mold, but with a white backlash spin (Chennault, 1996). LouAnne Johnson is a beautiful white woman who teaches a class of minority "rejects from Hell" who are bussed to a white school where they are supposed to be "a

school within a school" but are really just a ghetto within a suburb. She triumphs over adversity, this time personified in an insensitive Afro-American principal. The message of limitless potential for real-life improvement of minority schools is sealed with the fact that all these films herald that they are based on true stories.

The situation in the films of private schools is just the opposite of the minority public schools. Private schools are portrayed as unchanging, incapable of change, and opposed to change. For the filmmakers, the schools' *raison d'etre* is maintaining the inequitable status quo. Sometimes these films end with the death or exile of outsiders, as in *DPS*. Even in those films where protagonists beat the system (e.g., *School Ties* and *Scent*), the institutions per se remain unchanged, as evidenced by the unworthy headmasters still being ensconced in office. What is worse, the valiant protagonists seem to have been co-opted by the systems they have defeated: both Charlie and David Greene are Harvard bound. Deal (1991, p. 423) remarks that "*Dead Poets Society* cogently depicts the dilemma of balancing innovation and tradition," but he emphasizes that the film does not acknowledge the many private schools which successfully negotiate this challenge.

The only private school which does change is the one in *Princess*, though we are given no details on how the school functions in the new regime. Not coincidentally, it is only in the current film version of *Princess* that Miss Minchin is deposed and the school reformed. Fortuitously, the film sets the progressive revolution at World War I, as does Cremin (1964).

Private Schools in the Dock

What then is the film image of private schools? First, private schools are not what they claim to be. They are not hothouses for training the morally superior leaders of the future, but breeding grounds for the aristocratic oppressors of the masses. Second, their academic achievements come at a tragically high price. Finally, the schools' ingrained prejudices cannot be changed. *School Ties* tries to make the best of this bad situation by having the protagonist use the school for his own personal ends: David Greene tells the headmaster that "you used me for football, now

I'll use you for Harvard." While this may be vindication for the one working-class boy fortunate enough to make it to St. Matthew's, the condemnation of all schools like St. Matthew's stands.

Dead Poets Society ends with a more radical, if mixed message. Keating was himself a graduate of the Welton Academy who knew exactly what kind of institution he was taking on. The film's message is that if Welton could not be changed by an insider, it cannot be changed at all. Therefore, such institutions must simply be done away with. *DPS* does not make that message as explicit as the British film *If...* did in its literal armed attack on the oppressive College House, but then *If...* was made in 1969 when pictures of Che hung on the students' bulletin boards and ROTC weapons were at hand.

Only *Princess* offers hope for reforming private schools but without showing any details on how that transformation is accomplished. On the other hand, the remaking of Miss Minchin's "Seminary" into a "School" runs counter to the fact that most private education is currently under religious auspices. Perhaps the film hints that unfrocking private education should be the first step toward its democratization.

Thus, the film image of private schools is irredeemably negative. Individuals (like Charlie) may achieve a degree of enlightenment by battling these schools, but the schools themselves are incorrigible. Indeed, for the privileged classes served by these fictitious schools, that is exactly their virtue. By contrast, the worst of the public schools are shown capable of total transformation by dint of hard work. When these schools pull themselves up by their bootstraps, they succeed by the standards of White, majority culture (e.g., passing the Advanced Placement test in *Stand and Deliver* or meeting the state achievement test criterion in *Lean on Me*), a dilemma I have explored elsewhere (Resnick, 1997b). Giroux (1993) accurately concludes that "*Stand and Deliver* is ultimately a very conservative film" (p. 51).

The Power of Hegemonic Recuperation

My reading of these four films yields a total debunking of the supposed worth of private schools. But in light of Giroux's (1993, p. 37) observation that "hegemony has to be read as always

fractured, contradictory, and decentered ... in its continual attempt to recuperate forms of resistance," a brief look at whether or not the films communicate that negative image univocally is warranted. This reconsideration will focus on Giroux's and McLaren's (1991) analysis of *DPS*, as paradigmatic.

Their critique of the film is twofold. First, while it appears to portray resistance to institutional exploitation, in the end it does so only in the service of the privatized male ego, without challenging the existing social order. Because there is no higher vision of personal or social value, Keating lacks the gumption to defend himself against the principal's trumped-up charges. Thus the challenge to his students to make their lives extraordinary evaporates into aesthetics rather than struggle. A second, related critique is that the film reinforces a reactionary nostalgia for an earlier, mythically harmonious era – based on racist, sexist, and cultural domination – where the only need for struggle was personal, not social.

There is no doubt that the private schools are presented as racist, sexist, and Eurocentric, as I have already noted. The question is what effect this presentation has on the audience's view of private schools. I maintain that the clearcut message of all the films is that private schools are dehumanizing, immoral institutions. While some degree of unconscious recuperation is a possibility, the dominant message is that what these schools are and what they stand for is evil. If there is a recuperation in *DPS*, it may be an unintended consequence of setting the film 30 years "too early," thus lulling a liberal audience into self-righteous inaction, on the order of "Look how much progress we've made since 1959; *our* private schools are integrated by race *and* gender." On this reading, the film preserves rather than challenges contemporary racism. But portraying the subtler forms of racism in contemporary, integrated private schools might not have evoked the outrage which was generated by the anachronistic portrayal of the all-white, misogynistic, brutally authoritarian Welton School of 1959. Because of the timeless tone of films like *DPS* and the audience's lack of first-hand knowledge of private schools, viewers are led to conclude that that is how private schools are now, making them unworthy of public support. Indeed, as experienced an observer as Eisner is won over to that position:

"Now, literally speaking, Welton Academy does not exist .... Yet schools like Welton do exist" (p. 6). I have found no evidence that any such schools (all male, all white, all upper-class) existed in 1989 when the film was made, let alone in 1997 when Eisner wrote.

The film does take a liberal stance, localizing evil in individuals rather than in the system itself. Thus, the system partially recuperates itself by allowing us to imagine that all can be set right by merely substituting a humane principal for a merciless one, or a sympathetic parent for an authoritarian one. Mired in its own "belief in the humanist subject as the unified agent of history" (Giroux, 1993, p. 37), the film would have us believe that the villains are the cause of the evil, rather than its effects. Moreover, the film modulates the hegemony of the Welton School (and the class culture it represents) by showing samplings of the Welton students' counter-culture in which, for example, the school's honored pillars are mockingly referred to as "Decadence, Excrement, and Travesty." This is precisely the kind of "safe resistance" which seduces its drones into thinking that they have a consciousness independent of the hegemonic.

A similar, fractured ambiguity applies to Keating's failure to actively resist the repressive authority structures of the Welton School. Giroux's critique of Keating is certainly appropriate, though he has noted that one of the weaknesses of radical educators is that they "provide an oversimplified version of domination that seems to suggest that the only political alternative to the current role that schools play in the wider society is to abandon them altogether" (1988, p. 193). But the film's final word on resistance may not be identical to Keating's own reticence. I have already sketched a reading of the film which allows for an implicitly radical conclusion. The year 1859 (when Welton Academy was founded, John Dewey was born, and Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* was published) and 1959 (the year in which the film is set) are both thresholds of social and political upheaval. Slavery could not be obliterated in the South by heroic individual action, only by societal trauma. Keating fashions himself a latter-day Lincoln, but turns out to be only a cut-rate John Brown. Keating fails precisely because incremental change is incommensurate with the systemic overhaul private

education requires. Thus, Neil's suicide (itself the height of romantic narcissism) might be the first casualty in the great conflict, not the last. Hence the final shot of the film is not of Keating's retreat, but of a student's last stand on his desktop. If *DPS* has an implicit political message, it can as easily be radical as liberal. Thus, Giroux is wise to refuse to reduce *DPS* "to the reified terrain of relevance and teaching the conflicts," positing it instead "as a site of struggle over how representations mean differently" (p. 39).

Conclusion

The debate over the role of private schools in American society continues. However hot a national political issue it may be, at the state level the various forms of privatization are the focus of discussions about school improvement and innovation. The media certainly play a role in shaping public opinion, and fictional presentations about schooling may be even more powerful than news reports. To the extent these four films contribute to "ordinary knowledge" about private schools, they may impact on policy formation because the "most basic knowledge we use in social problem solving is ordinary" (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979, p. 13). Judged by major motion pictures, the debate is one-sided, concluding that private schools should be disbanded rather than expanded. The image of troubled public schools is equally simplistic, with the nostrum of "more hard work" sufficient to overcome all shortcomings. A more even-handed, nuanced film assessment of the contribution of private schools to American schooling is a desideratum.

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