

American Graffiti 40 Years Later

Saturday night at my house I often trot out classic movies and force the urchins to watch them. There is much wailing and gnashing of teeth, but I think it's important to teach kids about American culture, and films are certainly a big part of it. Actors like John Wayne, Cary Grant, Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn are worth seeing and remembering.

So the other night I trotted out American Graffiti, a film released 40 years ago. The movie was directed by Star Wars guy George Lucas and chronicles one night in the lives of some California teenagers in the year 1962.

The first thing the kids noticed was Harrison Ford, playing a young hood driving a hot rod. That got their attention. The movie featured other great actors like Richard Dreyfuss and Charles Martin Smith along with Ron Howard and Cindy Williams. Those two later turned the Graffiti success into the TV shows Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley.

About twenty minutes into the movie, which is heavy on dialogue, light on explosions, the urchins pulled out their iPads and began typing away. Dismay enveloped me.

"So you don't like this?" I asked the 14 year old.

"It's okay, I'm listening."

"But you're playing with that machine!"

"I can multi-task!"

A few minutes later the ten year old demanded popcorn. I told him we'd get it halfway through the flick.

"Do they get out of the cars ever?" The urchin wailed.

"That's the culture in California. They cruise around in cars listening to the radio."

"But there's so many cars!"

I was losing them.

So I paused the movie and brought in snacks. I demanded they shut off the machines while eating.

"Why?" The 14 year old asked.

"Because you can't text, eat, and watch a movie at the same time."

"Yes I can. I always do that."

"They're still in cars," the eight year old said.

We got through the movie but just barely. Interest peaked when the Pharaohs, a gang of juvenile delinquents, forced Dreyfuss to vandalize a police car. Finally some destruction!

After American Graffiti concluded I asked for their reviews. I got them while their heads were down looking at their iPads.

The consensus: It was okay. Too many cars.

These days the machines and awful films that blow things up every ten seconds are delivering heavy blows to American culture. The graffiti is on the wall. Attention spans for young people average about 30 seconds. Baseball? Forget it. Chess? Are you kidding me?

We live in a time where machines that deliver instant gratification rule. But I will continue to fight the cyberspace power. Coming attraction: Hitchcock's The Birds.

Let the texting begin.