The truest view rested in becomes false.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson
Journals, 1835

A way of seeing is always a way of not seeing.

-- Kenneth Burke
Permanence and Change, 1935

(To a poetic student and friend.) -- I only seek to put you in rapport. Your own brain, heart, evolution, must not only understand the matter, but largely supply it.

-- Walt Whitman
Specimen Days, 1882

There is more than one way to think about "education in American culture." This course highlights three of them, and asks what we stand to learn from each.

We begin with a series of four movie/videos: DENNIS THE MENACE (Nick Castle, 1993), DANGEROUS MINDS (John N. Smith, 1995), RISKY BUSINESS (Paul Brickman, 1983), and RENAISSANCE MAN (Penny Marshall, 1994). Most people have no inclination to take these films and others like them seriously. To me, however, the movies are as instructive as any books we might consider this semester.

What does it mean to be young in America at the end of the 20th century? It means, among things, being the object of formal instruction; hours upon hours of it, from kindergarten through graduate school. And precisely because the young must submit to teaching, because they are subject to it, they are in no position, so to speak, to be "the verb." Of course school at its best is always trying to make youth the doer of the action -- how to promote genuine activity in the classroom has been a motivating question for educational theory for well over a century -- but as a practical matter the young remain, on balance, "objects," not predicates. In DENNIS THE MENACE, however, as in HOME ALONE or BIG, "youth" is made to personify a
spontaneous curiosity, a life-giving inventiveness; an uncommon interpretive finesse. In a word, youth is power. The fact that this power is shown to be untutored -- a natural endowment -- and largely unrecognized and unappreciated (unappreciated because unrecognized?) by adults only heightens the interest as far as I'm concerned. So does the further implication that if we lose touch with this power, we die. But if we remain in touch with it -- responsive to it-- we have nothing to fear. We are complete, safe, or at least as safe as any of us can hope to be.

So what's going on here? What are these films thinking about education in American culture? Put DENNIS together with the remaining trio -- DANGEROUS MINDS, RISKY BUSINESS, and RENAISSANCE MAN -- and I hope you'll agree that the questions become even more intriguing. For instance: Why do the movies go out of their way to imagine scenes of instruction where the teachers are not schoolteachers, where the pedagogical authority is embodied in peers (as in RISKY BUSINESS) or adults (eg. RENAISSANCE MAN)? And when schoolteachers are in fact center-stage, as in DANGEROUS MINDS, why is the emphasis so often on what the teacher learns? Or consider this: Learning in the movies more often than not takes the characters by surprise. And this learning comes more often than not if and only if the characters in question somehow break (or are made to break) the rules, or even the law. Again, I want to ask: what's going on here?

We turn next to the university and to the academic writing of historians in particular, just the sort of book you might expect to encounter in a class like this: William A. Link, THE PARADOX OF SOUTHERN PROGRESSIVISM, 1880-1930 (University of North Carolina Press, 1992). THE PARADOX opens a set of possibilities for understanding education in American culture which is beyond the reach of film. Link shows us the social and institutional dynamics of change over time. Remember that remark from Speilberg's ET? "How do you explain school to a superior intelligence?" Link does it very well. As you'll see soon enough, most young people in the South at the end of the 19th century had little or no contact with school. But by the '20's, if not before, the institutional structures and the forms of life you and I now take for granted were in place. Once you finish Link's book, you'll have a much better idea than you do now why UK's College of Education came on the scene in the 1920's, and what the implications of that arrival amounted to.

Finally we're going to sample a brand of cultural criticism which is historically-minded, but also more free-wheeling than the historians can typically manage: Theodore Roszak's The Cult of Information: A Neo-Luddite Treatise on High-Tech, Artificial Intelligence and the True Art of Thinking (University of California Press, 2nd ed., 1994). THE CULT OF INFORMATION imagines a world where we learn without teachers. Because of the froth of excitement surrounding computer technology, he argues,
it's more difficult than ever to appreciate the difference between 'ideas' and 'information' -- the difference between information and comprehension.

In addition to completing the 15-hour field placement which is required in all sections of "Education & American Culture," you will write three short essays, one to cap each of section of the course. There will be no final exam. Your grade will be based on the quality of your written work and the caliber of your participation in class. Of course attendance counts. Does dribbling count in basketball?

Sept. 2: First day of class. Introductions and such. Assignment: watch any one or all of the following: BIG, HOME ALONE, or FRESH.

Sept. 9: DENNIS THE MENACE in class. Discussion. Assignment: Watch any one (or two) of the following: BLACKBOARD JUNGLE, UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE, DEAD POETS SOCIETY, STAND AND DELIVER, MAN WITHOUT A FACE, SCENT OF A WOMAN, WHITE SQUALL, MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS, IN & OUT, or 187.

Sept. 16: DANGEROUS MINDS in class. Assignment: Watch any one of the following: FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH, FAME, THE BREAKFAST CLUB, FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF, NOW AND THEN, RUBY IN PARADISE, LOOKING FOR BOBBIE FISCHER or HIGHER LEARNING.

Sept. 23: RISKY BUSINESS in class. Assignment: Watch any one of the following: KARATE KID, THE PAPER CHASE, THE FLAMINGO KID, WITH HONORS, BRONX TALE, or GOOD WILL HUNTING.

Sept. 30: First paper due. Wrap-up on the movies.


Oct. 21: To be continued...