

Film Reviews

P. Stern (Producer & Director).
STEPHANIE.
London, UK: Jane Balfour Films, 1986.

K. Rosenfeld (Producer & Director).
ALL AMERICAN HIGH.
New York, NY: Fox/Lorber, 1986.

These two documentary films on American high schools were shown at the Thirteenth International Film Festival in Montreal (August-September, 1987). Their content should be of interest to educators (1).

Stephanie, a 58-minute colour film produced and directed by Peggy Stern, has some points of similarity with a series of four films on a group of fourteen British children. The subjects in the series are now adults, having been filmed by Michael Apted every seven years for the past two decades. The first two were entitled *Now We Are Seven*, and *Seven Plus Seven*, and the latest is *28 Up* (Apted, 1984). *Stephanie*, Stern's subject, was first filmed (in black and white) by Stern in 1980, and there are a few flashbacks to the earlier film during the second one. Stern, then in her early twenties, was perhaps very inexperienced in cinematography when she made the earlier film, and the connection between the two is not at all clear. It appears that she may not have had the intention of filming a sequel when she made the first film.

Stephanie, a senior at Rindge and Latin School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is failing in the system, or, looked at in another way, she is someone whom the system has failed. The film follows *Stephanie* through her complete high school year. Time and time again, the film

juxtaposes Stephanie's perspective with those of her parents and teachers. Stephanie's main interest is art. Her exercise books are full of complex doodles. She would like to graduate from high school, but finds the core course requirements in math, science, social science, and English to be too difficult for her.

In the Harvard Graduate School of Education's special program in English and history for high school students at academic risk, Stephanie negotiates her own objectives and assignments with her peers and supervisor. At an evaluation session, she and her peers are very positive about the intimacy they feel that the program developed. They contrast the program with their regular school classes, where they feel they are treated impersonally, talked at, and led through work in lock-step, regardless of their own interests or abilities.

Unfortunately, the film focusses only briefly on samples of actual teaching. There is some footage of a math class in late winter. The teacher, going through the motions of explaining measures of central tendency, seems unaware or uncaring that her students are sleeping on their desks, talking, or doodling. It is impossible to know whether this is a biased or representative sample of the instruction available to Stephanie. There is a short interview, after the class is over, with the math teacher, who appears to be at an advanced stage of burnout.

Immediately after this troubling sequence, Stephanie is filmed in her room (which looks as if it had just been stricken by an earthquake) forging an absence note to give to the school discipline officer. She has great difficulty spelling the word "absence," and requests help from the film crew.

Stephanie's mother, a university graduate, has recently returned to college to take a master's degree in video. She seems concerned about her daughter's academic problems, but is unable to help her solve them. Stephanie's father, who never finished high school, is very inarticulate, but does not seem to be preoccupied by the fact that his daughter will almost certainly fail to graduate. He admits later in the year that he never paid a great deal of attention to her. He appears to think that Stephanie would "figure out a way to graduate." He adds, "As long as she was not taking drugs or getting pregnant" he did not worry about her. Stephanie, however, when asked at the end of the film if she had ever considered dropping out of school entirely, claimed that she had planned to do it, but that her father had persuaded her to stay.

There are various film sequences of Stephanie with the school personnel. One sequence records an exchange with the discipline officer, who is shown giving the young woman a detention for failing to report to

class on several occasions. (Stephanie later says that she hates the impersonal way she is taught and punished in school.) Her English teacher is filmed while she is supervising a supplementary test. Stephanie failed to take the regular test, and now she is absent from the supplemental. The teacher admits that this is not the major problem, as Stephanie has missed so many classes that she would not have passed the test in any case. A math teacher blames the demanding curriculum, which forced Stephanie to concentrate on computation, instead of allowing her to work on her favourite area: geometry. She is shown relating well to a percussion teacher, Jimmy, of whom she is extremely fond, and frequently misses classes to visit.

A rather inarticulate guidance counsellor tries to explain to Stephanie the different routes she can take to graduation, but she is easily distracted by the elegant black cocktail dress that the student pulls out to show her. Stephanie wants to wear it to the graduation prom, but she is worried that she will not be allowed to attend this important rite of passage, because, strictly speaking, she will not be graduating. (Later, we see her, in the cocktail dress, picking up her boyfriend in a huge limousine, and going to the dance.) She is absent from the graduation ceremony, and, in an interview, expresses regret that she will not be able to leave school with the rest of her friends. She is grappling with the choice of repeating her courses in math and science, or finding a job. When asked why she thinks that her friends managed to graduate, she replies that they got around their problems during the first three years of high school.

The highlight of the film is perhaps the discovery of a detailed school report from her second-grade teacher in Maine. In this report, the teacher had remarked on the very high and very low marks of a somewhat erratic year. Stephanie had excelled at reading and drama and art. The teacher had seen her as a "sensitive flower," and had noted that she suffered somewhat from having to compete with an older sister who was very successful in both academics and sport. (We never meet or hear about this sister anywhere else in the film.)

Stern tracked down the ex-second-grade teacher, and he reread his report of a decade earlier. When Stern asked him if he would have predicted that Stephanie would become an academic failure ten years later, he reflected for a moment, and said emphatically that "We don't nurture the joys . . . we ask fish to fly, and birds to swim." He felt that it was much more important as a teacher to accentuate the positive, and concentrate on a student's successes, rather than to dwell on the negative, and the failures. This interview is supplemented with a short colour video segment of Stephanie in grade two, hamming it up in a sketch with her friends. The vivacious eight-year-old is a sharp contrast with the blasé, bored, chain-smoker of ten years later.

A major problem with this film is that it does not focus clearly on its themes and characters, or deal with them in depth. After one hour, the viewer does not have a clear, multi-dimensional picture of the principal characters in the film, or the more general problem of young men and women who are frustrated and/or bored with school. If the director knows what the principal causes are for Stephanie's failure to graduate, she does not focus on them. The viewer, then, is unable to evaluate their relative importance. The vast majority of the people in the film are extremely inarticulate. It may well be true that most people, even most educators, are not good at expressing their thoughts and feelings, but art, including documentary art, should rise above this inadequacy, and delineate clearly what the thoughts and feelings are. Stern's voice is often heard. Her questions are ill-formed, hesitant, and of doubtful value in eliciting useful biographic facts or attitudes from the interviewees.

A second problem with the film is the lack of footage in which the chief protagonists interact with each other. Obviously, this is always difficult to accomplish in a true documentary, when one is attempting to capture "life in the raw," rather than recording the unspontaneous, rehearsed life that professional artists recreate in feature films. Nevertheless, the art of the good documentary film maker is to capture enough interaction in order to be able to select that which is significant. It is impossible to know *a priori* what interactions will be crucial for an understanding of how people are constructing their subjective reality of the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

There are many interviews with the protagonists, but very few discussions around the meal table, or when the television was turned off. Perhaps the very absence of interaction is significant in itself. Could it be that Stephanie is turned off school because she has so very little high-quality interaction with anyone in her family, or among her friends, or at school?

Stephanie has obviously failed to internalize the objective, mainstream reality of her high school, and has given up the struggle of playing the academic game. Unfortunately, it is not clear from the data available in the film *why* she gave up. The director seems to imply in the school sequences, which are uniformly unflattering, that the school is at fault. Covert implications are not enough in a documentary which deals with such a serious problem as social disaffectedness. Stephanie has failed to meet the expectations of her mother, her teachers, and many of her peers. Why?

Early in Goodlad's monumental *Study of Schooling in the United States*, it was apparent that there are four main groupings of goals for

schools: academic, vocational, social and civic, and personal (Goodlad, 1984, p. 37). There is no evaluation of whether Stephanie's school was derelict, and if it was, exactly how. Likewise, it is unclear if there were discrepancies among the goals aspired to by Stephanie, her parents, and the school. Neither Stephanie nor her parents were asked the kinds of questions which would have elicited disappointment about certain aspects of the school and its mission. It may well be that the teachers and other school personnel were not "connecting" (see Goodlad, 1984, p. 80) with Stephanie. This is an hypothesis that the data in the film only begin to support.

Stephanie's peers were not interviewed, so it is impossible to judge their importance as role models.

In short, there are so many data missing about Stephanie, her family, her school, and her peers, that it is impossible to identify causes for her failure to graduate, or to examine how she constructed her subjective reality of school.

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All American High, a 60-minute colour film produced and directed by Keva Rosenfeld, was, like *Stephanie*, also released in 1986. Although it is also a diachronic study, and follows a girl through her senior year in high school, it is a very different film from Stern's. Rosenfeld's production is slick and well photographed, and rock music is prominently featured on the soundtrack. Most important of all, it has as its main protagonist a highly articulate, sophisticated girl who is not American at all.

Rikki Rauhala is a visiting student from Finland. The film looks at her senior year at Torrance High School in an extremely affluent suburban neighbourhood in California. Rikki is filmed throughout the year, but it appears that her comments were made at the end of her sojourn. She was therefore filtering her impressions through the telescope of hindsight. Was this done because her English was not adequate at the beginning of her stay? It is extremely fluent and accurate at the end.

Rikki, like de Tocqueville, is able to see her American environment more clearly than most natives. She is acutely aware of American youth culture, and how different it is from that of Finland. She notes how important it is to "look good," and be a good athlete, rather than being an academic "nerd" (see also Goodlad, 1984, pp. 76-77). Time and time again, she remarks how the school focusses on social rather than academic goals. Popularity looms larger than educational honours.

Rikki believes that her American peers use members of the opposite sex. They have a boyfriend or girlfriend for decoration, to show that they are

desired and popular, not because they really like the other person, or enjoy his or her company. She was frank about the differences in teenage sexuality between the two countries. In Finland, she said that 14- or 15-year-olds had their first experience of sexual intercourse as part of growing up. "It's no big deal." She found that her 18-year-old Torrance friends talked a great deal about sex, but shrank from actually participating. Two of her American boyfriends had broken up with her, because they were too guilt-ridden to consummate their romance in bed, as Rikki expected.

The film shows the school's ping-pong and game machine room. The students collect \$200 a week from its users. We see the "hoopla" surrounding the Homecoming Queen celebrations and the football game rituals. We see a Saturday night party with over 200 teenagers paying \$5.00 each to dance and drink beer. The party-goers only leave because the host/promoter calls the police (who never come) to break up a drunken fight. We go to one of the largest shopping malls in America, where certain specialty stores sell nothing but teddy bears, or novelty paper and stickers. Rikki comments on it all with a mixture of recalled amazement, cynicism, and enthusiasm. She is acutely aware of having been confronted with a very different objective social reality when she arrived, but of having changed her own subjective reality to suit her situation. "When in Rome"

We see more teaching at Torrance High than at Stephanie's school. As usual, the film medium (especially a fast-moving film such as this) does not like long passages of academically-oriented lessons. There is a discussion on nuclear disarmament, with students repeating (according to Rikki) what they hear their parents say. A shot of a teacher in the lecturing mode shows students daydreaming and exchanging gossip, much as in a similar lesson at Stephanie's school.

Much more time is spent on a social studies project which has everyone choosing a marriage partner, going through a mock wedding, and then a mock divorce. While a few students claim that they were being treated like kindergarten children, most seemed very caught up in the lengthy simulation. Rikki noted that many of the courses were optional, with a heavier emphasis on the vocational (such as auto mechanics) than in Finland. We see a balanced, hands-on approach to science, with a biology lesson involving the dissection of frogs. We also see military recruitment (a great surprise to Rikki) taking place during schooltime. Interspersed throughout the filming of curricular and extra-curricular activities are Rikki's comments, sometimes elicited during a formal interview in her host family's home.

Her considered opinion of her experience of American education in a public high school attended by affluent Americans is that "I learned to be

lazy here. I don't know how I will manage when I get back to Finland. It will be a big change." Earlier, she had noted how most scholastic evaluation was done by multiple-choice tests or short-answer quizzes, not through writing compositions, as in Finland. She did not appear to regret having spent the year learning to be lazy, and planned to continue travelling to different countries, experiencing different objective realities, and then "make up my mind which way is best."

I would recommend this film to anyone, but especially to a student of education who is interested in examining his or her own subjective belief of what a North American high school is like. Although it is by no means a serious sociological study, the vivid quality of the film makes it provocative and memorable for those who are concerned with the processes and products of schools. In courses dealing with the philosophy or sociology of education, this would be a good recent film to ask students to see, prior to a discussion on the perceived and preferred goals (see Goodlad, 1984) of those who deliver or consume the services provided by our schools. Because Torrance High is seen through foreign (in this case, Finnish) eyes, it would be especially valuable in comparative education courses. It would be a good film to focus discussion on one kind of North American school, which could then be contrasted with other kinds (rural, periurban, inner city, etc.) inside and out of North America.

NOTE

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