

'American Graffiti' too slow for new generation

On Saturday nights 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

certainly are a big part of it. Actors like John Wayne, Cary Grant, Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn are worth seeing and remembering.



Bill O'Reilly
Commentary

So the other night I trotted out "American Graffiti," a film released

40 years ago. The movie was directed by "Star Wars" creator 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 features other great actors such as Richard Dreyfuss and Charles Martin Smith, along with Ron Howard and Cindy Williams, who turned the "Graffiti" success into the television hits "Happy Days" and "Laverne and Shirley."

About 20 minutes into the movie, which is heavy on dialogue and 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 OK. I'm listening."

"But you're playing with that machine!"

"I can multitask!"

A few minutes later, the 10-year-old demanded popcorn. I told him we'd get some halfway through the flick.

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

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

"But there are 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 8-year-old said.

We got through the movie, but just barely. Their 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.

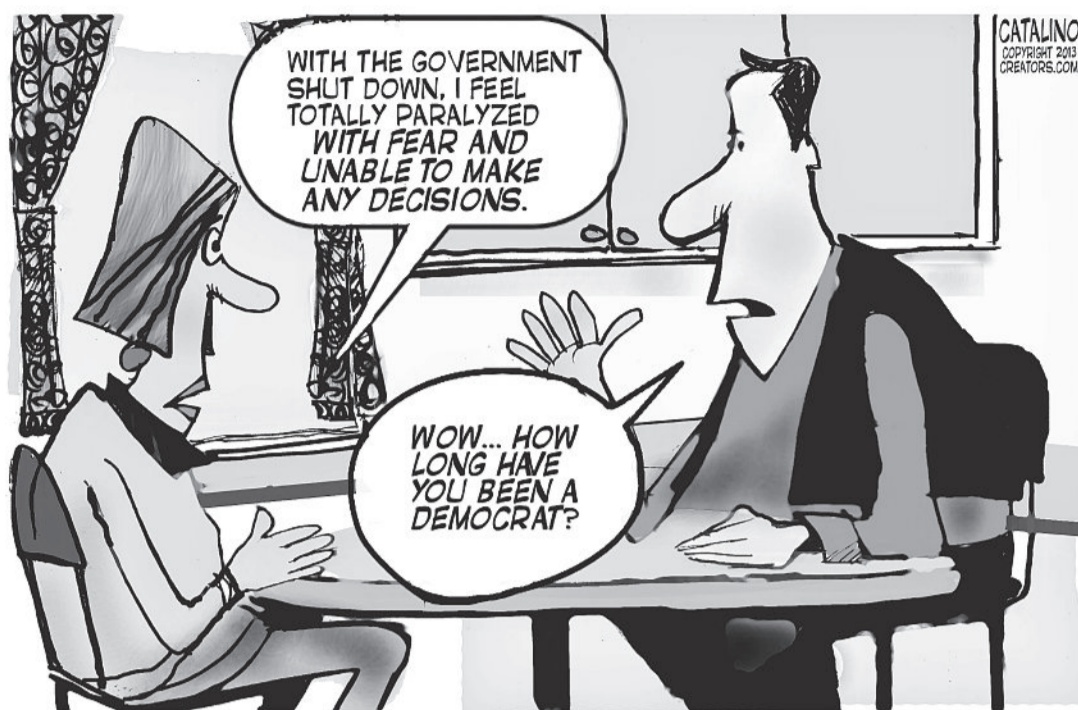
The consensus: It was OK. Too many cars.

These days, the machines and awful films that blow things up every 10 seconds are delivering heavy blows to American culture. The graffiti is on the wall. The attention spans of 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.

You can contact O'Reilly at info@creators.com.



Technology is training us to look down

The thing might be funny, except that somebody died. That part isn't funny at all. But the rest of it, the moments before Justin Valdez was killed, read like some twisted skit on "Saturday Night Live."

You have to get the picture as captured on surveillance video and described by authorities in a story published last week by the San Francisco Chronicle. You have to see the suspect, 30-year-old Nikhom Thephakaysone, sitting on the light-rail train, pulling out his .45-caliber pistol, pointing it across the aisle, putting it back, pulling it out several times again, and at one point wiping his nose with the hand holding the gun — and nobody notices because they're too busy staring down at their smartphones and tablet computers. We're talking about a train crowded with commuters and this guy is waving a gun around but nobody sees him, so engrossed are they in texting, tweeting and playing Angry Birds.

Finally, according to police, Thephakaysone shot Valdez in the back of the head as the 20-year-old college student was exiting the train. That got people's attention. Indeed, the apparently random Sept. 23 tragedy has rocked the Bay Area. It ought to rock the whole country.

In the murder of Justin Valdez and the bizarre scenario leading up to it, we find



Leonard Pitts
Commentary

fresh, albeit bloody, evidence of how social media and high technology have changed us. These devices and new platforms of communication were supposed to allow us to be better-connected to one another. Take this murder as Exhibit A for the argument that they actually do the

opposite.

Granted, they provide a link to someone who is not there, but it is at the cost of separation from someone who is. Next time you're on a plane waiting for takeoff, next time you're on public transit, next time you're in a restaurant, count all the eyes fixed to all the screens, all the ears stuffed with tiny white buds, all the spaces that once would have been filled with casual conversation and eye contact, now filled by the silence of people who are not there, people who occupy the same place at the same time worlds apart.

Then these people go home to their families where they watch separate programs in separate rooms while the kids retreat to rooms of their own to text and tweet the night away. Because we have all these new options for self-entertainment and the option we most frequently choose, it seems, is to be alone, together.

Your humble correspondent is as guilty as anyone. Indeed, with an introvert's instinct for solitude, he may

be guiltier than most.

But even an introvert can see there is something wrong with this picture. Even an introvert can feel something is lost when human connectivity, human society, human intercourse, are reduced to pixels on a screen and everybody is looking down.

Yes, it sounds like an abstract complaint, the kind of observation one makes when one is paid to navel gaze and think big thoughts.

However, the death of Justin Valdez robs us of the luxury of believing this does not matter or has no real world application. This killing may speak to our refusal to take guns out of the hands of those who should not have them. It might bear upon our unwillingness to impose safeguards ensuring that those who need mental health care receive it.

But surely it speaks at least as loudly and directly to the alienation and disconnect that have been the ironic, unintended consequence of devices and platforms designed to bring us together. After all, Justin Valdez is dead, at least in part, because it is now possible to wave a gun around in a crowded train without being noticed.

Technology has trained us to look down in search of connection. This man's death is a cruel reminder:

You need to look up sometimes as well.

You can contact Pitts at lpitts@miamiherald.com.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Today is Thursday, Oct. 17, 2013. On this date:

» In 1777, British forces under Gen. John Burgoyne surrendered to American troops in Saratoga, N.Y., in a turning point of the Revolutionary War.

» In 1919, the Radio Corporation of America was cre-

ated.

» In 1931, mobster Al Capone was convicted of income tax evasion and sentenced to 11 years in prison. (He was released in 1939.)

» In 1933, Albert Einstein arrived in the United States as a refugee from Nazi Germany.

» In 1945, Col. Juan Peron

staged a coup, becoming absolute ruler of Argentina.

» In 1957, French author Albert Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature.

» In 1979, Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her years of work on behalf of the destitute in India.

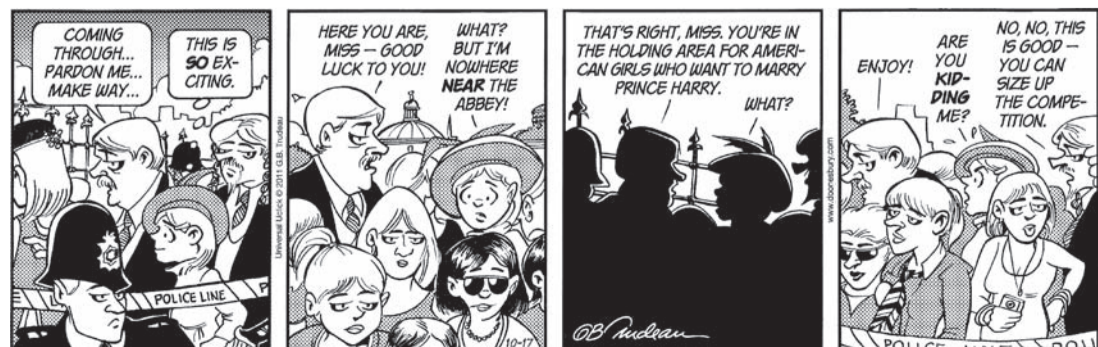
What makes you thankful? Tell us

For our Thanksgiving issue, we want to hear the things you are grateful for this year. Please limit your responses to

10 words or fewer per item. A selection of your responses will be printed, and all will appear on our website. E-mail

to ckocher@gannett.com. Deadline for submissions is Nov. 13.

DOONESBURY



LAUREL'S

Assistance with concert appreciated

» **Laurel from Joanne and Deborah Cipolla-Dennis of The American Military Partner Association:** Thank you to The Unitarian Church of Ithaca for providing the space for the Season for a Reason concert, and to the Social Justice Team who helped to bring awareness of the inequality of our military families being denied access to the same benefits.

The bands provided more than music. A journey into music by Susan Murphy's band, Answer the Muse, was an experience. Jan Nigro and Friends, The Neo Project and Five Mile Drive added to "Standing on the Side of Love," the mantra of the Unitarian Church. So many wonderful citizens came out to donate to AMPA after hearing the story of Sgt. Donna Johnson and her widow, Tracy.

Thank you to Jim Murphy for providing sound. Many thanks to those people who took a stand for justice by coming to the concert and donating to end discrimination for military couples married in non-equality states, but not recognized where they serve. AMPA is a nonprofit, bipartisan, national organization that educates, assists and lobbies for equality across the nation with local member volunteers in Ithaca.

AMPA deeply appreciates all who are standing up showing respect for our soldiers.

Pasta dinner raised money for needy

» **Laurel from Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga:** Thanks and gratitude to the following organizations and individuals who contributed to the success of our first pasta dinner on St. Francis Day in support of our programs serving low-income and vulnerable people:

St. Catherine of Siena Parish, Guest Chef Extraordinaire Father Joe Marcoux, GreenStar Coop Natural Foods Market, Cornell University's Gamma Chapter of the service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega, the staff and family members of Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga, All Saints Parish, Clara Barrett, Marney Thomas, Mary Berens, Mary Lou Garrity, Trece Stevenson, Julie Berens, Phil Cox, Eky Hohendahl, Norene Ryan and all those who attended and/or made donations.

With your support, we will continue to give "help that works and hope that lasts"!

IPEI says thanks for help with event

» **Laurel from the Ithaca Public Education Initiative:** We would like to thank the following businesses and organizations for making the Kids Discover the Trail! Business After Hours event on Oct. 9 a huge success: the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, Ithaca City School District Food Services, Cornell Plantations, the Discovery Trail members, Corner Store Catering, Corks and More, Business is Blooming, and all of the event attendees.

We appreciate your commitment and your contribution to enhancing the education of 2,900 Ithaca elementary schoolers every year.