
Teaching, Learning and Schooling in Film: Reel Education is a most welcomed collection of essays in a much neglected area of pedagogical research. The endeavour of teaching is both a public one, performed in front of a classroom of students, and a private one, as teachers are hardly observed by other educators or the public, when they are teaching, except perhaps for the occasional classroom observation. The general perception of teaching is thus gathered from one’s own experience of the classroom as a student and through representations of teaching and school in the media. Edited by Daniel P. Liston and Ian Parker Renga, the essays in this book do a service to teachers by drawing important lessons from screen representations of pedagogy, and marrying this with theoretical frameworks and practical applications. Despite the generic stereotypes, the simplification of the teaching process and the happy ending resolutions, the portrayal of teaching in movies does not merely entertain, but informs, comments on and influences the perception of the profession. As the book title suggests, the fifteen essays are divided equally into three sections: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling. Inevitably, these categories are artificial and overlap, but they serve as a convenient method of focusing on the key facets of the teaching enterprise.

The articles in the Teaching section focus largely on the persona of the teacher rather than on the process of teaching per se. The essays should preferably be read in sequence as the concepts build upon each other. As teachers, we are familiar with the teacher archetype in movies – the eccentric maverick renegade who takes on the conservatism of school bureaucracy and transforms the lives of repressed depressed students. In the first chapter, The Teacher Archetype in the Movies, James Rhem traces the development of the Jungian
archetype of the teacher from movies like Goodbye, Mr Chips (1939), Apartment for Peggy (1948) and Blackboard Jungle (1955) to more recent incarnations. Besides contributing to our collective idea of what is expected of a teacher and the challenges that confront the teacher in the classroom, this archetype sets up an idealized image that we carry within us, a teacher defined by generativity, community and authority. Avram Barlowe and Ann Cook, in their article From Blackboard to Smartboard: Hollywood’s Perennially Misleading Teacher Heroes, posit that the teacher as hero prototype depicted in six movies including To Sir, With Love (1967), Dangerous Minds (1995) and Freedom Writers (2007) has become a trope that is tired, inaccurate and unhelpful. Romanticizing the teacher as an individual who defies conventions, subverts school authority and succeeds where the rest of the school has failed does not encourage teachers to collaborate and function within their own individual contexts.

Using Freedom Writers as her main text, Ian Parker Renga disrupts the Heroic Teacher Narrative by employing the lens of a Trickster and suggests that the missionary zeal of the heroic teacher presumes a privilege and a calling that sets the teacher against colleagues, students, school leadership, and even, family. She concludes by quoting William Ayers that “all attempts to reduce teaching and learning to a formula, to something easily predictable, degrade it immeasurably.” (Ayers, 1994). At this point, Daniel P. Liston’s Contending Views of Teaching in Film uses Stand and Deliver (1988) and Dead Poets’ Society (1989) to anchor the argumentative trajectory of this section on four educational traditions – the progressive approach of John Dewey, the conservative emphasis of J. D. Hirsch, the radical framework of George Counts and Freirean Freire, and the spiritual purpose of Sam Intrator, Parker Palmer and Dwayne Huebner. In a departure from the predominantly Hollywood movies thus far, the final chapter in this section, Monsieur Lazhar: The Subversive Dance of Relationship and the “Fierce Urgency of Now” by Linda Irwin-DeVitis and Joseph L. DeVitis, discusses how conventional movies about teaching subsume the individual teacher to the role of martyr,
learner or challenger of the status quo. In contrast, the protagonist, Monsieur Lazar, is not a teacher, but rather a man who is teaching, thus, emphasizing concepts like personal growth, mutual learning and authentic relationships. Although the five essays work coherently as an argument that debunks the conventional depiction of the teacher in film, the selection of movies, save for Monsieur Lazhar, are typically Hollywood productions and this leaves much to be desired. Even with commercial feature films, the multiple facets of the teacher could have been further explored with more varied teacher types, for example, mentors like Yoda, or even the depiction of teacher-student relationships in Notes on a Scandal (2006), Elegy (2008) and The English Teacher (2013).

Of the three sections, the section on Learning was, to me, the most enjoyable. Most teacher movies focus on the teacher instead of the learner so the insights in this section were fresh and applicable. Moreover, the authors draw from a richer diversity of film sources. This is immediately evident when Jennie Whitcomb’s Pastry, Practice, and the Pursuit of Excellence: A Commentary on Kings of Pastry deviates from models of school-based learning typical of the earlier section to focus on a movie about a French patisserie competition. What begins as a seemingly forced correlation is a revelation of how discipline, feedback and commitment to improvement can result in mastery, excellence and expertise of a craft. In Dilemmas of Becoming in Searching for Bobby Fischer, Kevin O’Connor, Lisa Comparini, Stephen Dine Young, and Anna-Ruth Allen contrast the cognitive and situated views of learning in their discussion of how the protagonist learns to play chess. Caught between the speed chess he learnt from the streets and tournament chess results in a dilemma of becoming that can only be resolved depending on what is valued and what is perceived to be the endpoint of that trajectory of development. In Whale Rider: Culture, Cosmopolitanism, and Unofficial Schooling, Steven Weiland extends the section’s departure from classroom learning by describing how a Maori tribe has to learn how to preserve and sustain its tradition by socializing and transforming its
indigenous education. Education thus plays a social function in ensuring the cultural transition and continuity necessary in the face of encroaching cosmopolitanism.

My favorite essay in the volume was Liston and Renga’s *The History Boys and Cosmopolitanism*, which draws from a wide range of educational theory from David Hansen to E. D. Hirsh to Susan Sontag in order to produce an insightful analysis of the movie and its implications on our instructional objectives of teaching subjects like history. To the authors, *The History Boys* resists the didactic familiar binary of good and bad teaching found in other movies about teaching. Instead by offering viable competing discourses of educational purpose, it confronts the viewer to reflect on one’s own position with regards to what one values in education because embracing any one philosophy will unwittingly mean dealing with its “shadow sides and inadequacies”. In the coda of this section, David T. Hansen and Kyung Hwa Jung trace the evolution of the protagonist in Lee Chang-Dong’s *Poetry* (2010) to elucidate a poetics of moral education. It is a firm reminder that learning carries a responsibility to build the moral perception and sensibility of our students, expressed in an attunement, awareness and responsiveness to the needs of the world around us. This section offered a range of access points and ideas on how the process of learning can manifest itself in films that have diverging subject matter, styles and intentions.

Having considered other forms of education that occur outside the classroom, the book returns its focus to the larger picture of educational organization and policy in the final section that focuses on Schooling. The introductory essay, Megan J. Laverty’s *Creating Classroom Civility*, brilliantly deconstructs the complex power relations of the teacher-student relationship. Using *The Class* (2008) as the basis of her argument, Laverty describes how teachers “reinforce and reproduce social inequalities in the name of overcoming them”. By legislating civility, suppressing discord and enforcing respect for authority, schooling is “a form of conquest and
colonization” when it should be a just, inclusive and equitable community of mutual interaction and communication. In contrast, the final four essays tend to be culturally specific in delineating how schools serve the advantaged and oppress the marginalized. In White Supremacy, Neo/Colonial Education, and the Struggle for Precious Knowledge, José Garcia, Luis Urrieta, Jr., and Eric Ruiz Bybee maintain that the attacks on the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District depicted in the documentary Precious Knowledge: Arizona’s Battle Over Ethnic Studies (2011), are a historical, concerted and continued effort to normalize, neutralize and naturalize whitestream schooling. As institutions of colonization, schools subdue indigenous language and knowledge systems to assimilate students to an unmarked, dominant, assumed superior “mainstream” norm, negatively impacting students’ ethnic identities, academic achievement, and understanding of their lived realities. The critique of the documentary Dropout Nation (2012) in Dropout Nation: The School to Prison Pipeline, Educational Reform, and Caring for African American and Latino Students by Courtney S. Robinson, Luis Urrieta, Jr., and Nydia A. Counts showcases how the media depicts school dropouts as a consequence of an individual student’s own motivation and academic capacity, rather than a structural and systemic sociopolitical policy of racializing, dehumanizing, and disposing of students of particular colour, gender and class from the system. The practice of Zero Tolerance policies in urban schools in criminalizing students lead instead to further discipline, punishment and disengagement rather than their learning and social assistance.

The last two essays in this section work as companion pieces. In the first, James Trier traces the dialectical progression of the three documentaries on education by Davis Guggenheim. Trier’s thesis is that Waiting for “Superman” (2010) clashes dialectically with The First Year (2001) but both are synthesized in TEACH (2013). Using Stuart Hall’s reading theory of encoding and decoding, Trier, applies three kinds of reading on the movies, a preferred reading that interprets the text in the way the creator of the text wants it understood, a negotiated
reading which problematizes the text and identifies contradictory objectionable elements in it, and an oppositional reading in which the semiotics of a text are intentionally misread to reject a preferred reading. In the penultimate essay, Katy M. Swalwell and Michael W. Apple discuss the arguments put forth by *Waiting for “Superman”* and an independent film, *The Inconvenient Truth Behind “Waiting for ‘Superman’”* (2011), which was produced by the Grassroots Education Movement in response to it and in defense of public schools in the United States. These two essays demonstrate how the representation of education in movies can expose the fault lines of current debate on educational policy and stimulate public dialogue on crucial questions that affect the education of our children. Besides Laverty’s essay, the heavy use of documentaries and the specificity of the essays to an American context caused the section to be more informative than generally applicable.

In all, the essays fulfil the objective of drawing pedagogical insight from commercially produced films that aim primarily to entertain or inform. The chapters are extremely reader-friendly, providing a synopsis of the films examined to make it unnecessary for the reader to have watched the movie before reading the essay. Although movies about teachers and teaching have been studied, the collection perceives education in a wider context and extends its reach to include documentaries, and other narrative feature films. Both as a resource on film studies and an explication of pedagogy and education in film, this book will help readers be more aware of how the portrayal of the profession coincides with their own perception of teaching and consider how the films they enjoy may be influencing them to reconsider and recalibrate their pedagogy.

Dr Dennis Yeo

English Language and Literature Academic Group

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Email: dennis.yeo@nie.edu.sg