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Requested: 2009-10-07 / Received: 2010-02-10  
Accepted: 2010-05-28 / Published: 2010-10-01

DOI:10.3916/C35-2010-02-05

# Educational Systems in the Heterodox History of European Cinema

Los sistemas educativos en la memoria heterodoxa del cine europeo

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the portrayal of education in European cinema from the perspective of their systems of education and the behaviour of teachers and pupils in the classroom. Since its very beginnings, cinema has played a significant role in forming the collective European memory, and has cast a critical eye over pedagogy and didactics, especially with regard to young outcasts. The article reviews a number of films whose subject is education, the classroom and the role of parents and teachers in educating children. Education and children is a recurrent theme in European cinema, which examines its subject from a critical viewpoint that is sometimes satirical and occasionally savage. The exclusion, marginalization, neglect and manipulation of children and adolescents, and the abuse and merciless severity of certain educational systems are all part of the collective European memory thanks to the condemnation of some of the best films ever made in the continent. They ask pointed questions about educational systems, the behaviour of teachers and inadequate didactics, as well as tackling the conflicts in a multiethnic society.

## RESUMEN

Analizar el cine europeo desde una perspectiva educativa y en cuanto a sus sistemas educativos y la vida en las aulas de profesores y alumnos, es el objeto de este trabajo. El cinematógrafo, desde sus comienzos, ha tenido una gran influencia en el establecimiento de la memoria colectiva europea, en especial, en la visión crítica que aporta al mundo de la pedagogía y la didáctica, que ha tratado casi desde sus inicios, en particular hacia los menores y adolescentes marginados. Se citan brevemente y se presentan una serie de films que tienen que ver con la educación, las aulas, el rol de maestros, profesores, padres y educadores en relación con los niños... temas que han sido recurrentes en el cine europeo, expuesto en su mayor parte de forma crítica, y en ocasiones, de manera satírica o con excepcional dureza. La exclusión, la marginalidad y el abandono, la manipulación de niños y adolescentes, los malos tratos y la dureza despiadada de algunos sistemas educativos... forman parte de la memoria colectiva de Europa, con la ayuda de algunas denuncias del mejor cine que se han realizado en el Continente. Se plantean así agudos interrogantes sobre la educación, los sistemas educativos, los comportamientos de maestros y profesores y la escasez de didácticas adecuadas, así como los conflictos en una sociedad multiétnica.

## KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Cinema, memory, history, Europe, school, education, marginalization, didactics.  
Cine, memoria, historia, Europa, escuela, educación, marginación, didáctica.

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«Cinema neither replaces History as a discipline nor complements it. Cinema is adjacent to History, just like other forms of expression that links us to the past, such as memory or oral tradition» (Rosenstone, 1997). «Hard Skin wants to know: Why are children nearly always forgotten in the struggles of men?» (Truffaut, 1976). «Of all Humanity's injustices, the injustice meted out to children is the worse, the most despicable. Life is not always fair and it never will be» (François Richet, the teacher in Truffaut's film *L'Argent de Poche*). When Daniel Lefevre, headmaster of the Hoy school starts it all off, bursting into the town hall to talk to the mayor, the latter tells him, «let the parents take care of them», to which Lefevre replies, «and what do we do with these children?».

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century right up to today, Europe has filmed its citizens, their customs, ideologies and history. Early cinema recorded reality as the camera saw it, a train arriving at a station, workers coming out of a factory, theatre and circuses or the deeds of some brave aviator: these are documents that portray a vital, active Europe eager to put down on film everything that was going on around them. Later, cinema produced stories and fiction on film was born, thanks to Alice Guy-Blaché and Georges Méliès, among others. These early films are now considered to be the ultimate in historical documents. The first fiction films portrayed reality very well. Today, we use the docufiction concept to explain how a director moves between these two currents using resources from both cinema types.

Few film documents remain of the world of education from the early years, except snippets of classrooms, children at play, etc. Nevertheless instruction and education, despite their link to political propaganda, were never far from the minds of directors like Eisenstein, who was clear about the instructional nature of his films, whose scripts contained a very obvious didactic approach.

Teachers have always figured on film. We recall the odd teacher in «Der Blaue Engel» (Germany, 1930) directed by Josef von Sternberg, and its English version with cuts, *Blue Angel* (1931), in which the demanding and sexually repressed Immanuel Rath, played by Emil Jannings, is seduced by Lola the singer (Marlene Dietrich). The film was based on the novel by Heinrich Mann. It deals with the repression and strictness at a secondary school that are conquered by the emotions and sentiments of students and teacher, which end up making him look a fool and lead to his downfall.

By the start of World War II, the classroom and the role of parents and teachers in children's education

was a common subject for European cinema, which was critical of official policies, often satirizing the rules and execution of political and pedagogical correction imposed by the authorities and common sense of the adult world of the time. They are now documents of historical interest for anyone interested in the Europe of the past.

«Zéro de conduit» (France, 1933), banned until 1945, is Jean Vigo's song to childhood anarchy in which the director recalls his infancy in boarding schools. The story tells of four young students who decide to rebel against the strict regulations of the institution they live in. The film was a big influence on Truffaut's «Les quatre cents coups».

It was Italian Neorealism and, to a greater extent, the Nouvelle Vague in France that brought education, schools and teachers to the fore, and their criticism was harsh. Vittorio de Sicca's «Ladri di biciclette» (1948) or «Les quatre cents coups» can be classified as documentary cinema, an authentic mirror to an age, as well as fiction film whose starting point is autobiographical, very much in touch with reality, shot outdoors with unknown actors, ordinary people in the street, which shows real life as it was. Ridiculous teachers of outdated methods figure in «Amarcord» (1973) by Federico Fellini, who looks back at his infancy and adolescence, his school friends and teachers with their obsessions and paranoias.

The film directed by José María Gutiérrez Santos, «Arriba Hazaña» (Spain, 1978), is about disturbances at a religious school provoked by the repressive methods of its teachers in the Spain of Franco's dictatorship. Louis Malle's «Au revoir, les enfants» (1987) also deals with dramatic childhood memories in a story set in 1944, and his friendship with a Jewish boy at a Catholic boarding school during the Nazi occupation of France.

A mother's struggle against the social services for the return of her children is the subject of Ken Loach's «Ladybird, ladybird» (Great Britain, 1994). Based on a true story, it displays the coldness of public authorities which put compliance with the law before a mother's attempt to be reunited with her children and make a new life for herself.

### 1. Cinema as memory of childhood marginalization

One of the greatest challenges of teaching has always been the education of marginalized children. In Europe and the civilized world, there are still children who, through neglect, abuse, imprisonment or isolation, would be little more than savages, according to Linneo.

With Truffaut's «L'enfant sauvage» (France, 1969), with photography by Néstor Almendros, we enter the educationally problematic world of socialization, at a time when the subject was hotly debated across Europe. Truffaut himself had been an outcast as a child; he was a juvenile delinquent, had done time in correctional institutions and deserted from the French army. What saved him was his voracious reading and love of the cinema, and his adoption by the critic André Bazin and his wife Janine, from whom he got the love and affection missing from his own family, and protection from the law that persecuted him.

The film is based on the writings of the doctor and pedagogue Jean Itard, who fought to have Victor, a boy of 12 found wandering the forests of Aveyron, accepted by the French society of the early 19th century. He became Victor's mentor and succeeded in getting the renowned psychiatrist of the time, Pinel, to declare that he could become a civilized and independent human being. In the film, Victor's character reflects the fascination felt by the civilized world for the savage, and it is a debate on how to educate them.

Truffaut's «L'enfant sauvage» uses a range of film techniques, such as voice-over from documentaries and the closing shutter effect of silent films.

He also proposes substituting Rousseau's Natural Man for Moral Man, a personality forged from a long process of integration and endowed with an unquestionable sense of justice.

The film also brings up many of the serious problems in pedagogy and research that remain unsolved: whether to take a person out of his environment or leave him in his natural surroundings, like a forest; force him to exist in a hostile environment, like Parisian society; send a child to boarding school or be socialized at home (Itard, 1802); putting scientific investigation of the individual before his personal needs; to instruct or educate. Is the behaviour and the ideas that define human beings innate or acquired? What is the effect of social contact during the formative years? Can the lack of socialization in the formative years be

reversed in later life? Is the backwardness in some children the result of cerebral pathologies or prolonged isolation? Can people be taught at any stage in life or are there specific biological moments for learning? Does being strict or sympathetic improve learning? How are moral values acquired? (Itard, 1801). Many of the questions brought up by Truffaut in this film are the same ones that educationalists grapple with today.

In «Les quatre cents coups» (France, 1959), Truffaut portrays France from the start of the 1960s (the first of four films in the series that ends with «L'amour en fuite», in 1979) through the daily misad-

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ventures of a 12-year-old boy, Antoine Doinel, played by Jean Pierre Léaud, who is disenchanted with the adult world: his father is a failure; he finds his mother, who tried to abort him as an unwanted pregnancy, in bed with her lover; his teachers ignore him, law officials and psychiatrists merely play the bureaucrat. After playing truant from school and getting involved in petty crime, he is interned in a reformatory from which he escapes to see the sea (Truffaut, 1971). We see his personality develop over the four films: from neglected youth through courtship and marriage to divorce at the end. It is a critical portrait of European society plagued by double standards, crippling disabilities and lies.

In «L'argent de poche» (1976) Truffaut denounces the attitude of adults incapable of seeing children as people: they are either authoritarian or they ignore

them; they instil them with fear and feelings of guilt. In other words, having lost the innocence and spontaneity of those childhood years, the adult acquires a hard heart and soft skin; children, on the other hand, have a soft heart and hard skin (Truffaut, 1976).

Truffaut contrasts the attitudes and behaviour of various teachers, tutors or parents towards children and adolescents. In «Les quatre cents coups», teacher Richet (Jean-Francoise Stévenin) is pleasant, willing and flexible; he shows concern for his pupils, he knows and appreciates them. He is a father and friend to them, a warm human being who helps them through difficult periods in their lives, which contrasts with teacher Petit (Chantal Mercier), who is authorita-

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rian and inflexible. She is more concerned with school work than with her pupils. In «Le petit sauvage», the hard inflexible personality of Dr Itard occasionally clashes with the maternal affection shown by Mme. Guérin.

European cinema has produced innumerable films about marginalized children and teenagers. «7 Virgenes» (Spain, 2005) by Alberto Rodríguez, deals with adolescents serving time in a reform school, and criticises the social response to the treatment of excluded youth.

Ken Loach condemns a society that makes life hard for an alienated youth who wants to change, in «Sweet Sixteen» (Great Britain, 2002).

In «Ratcatcher» (Great Britain and France, 1999) directed by Lynne Ramsay, describes the complex world of a child living in a Glasgow suburb during a strike by rubbish collectors.

Fernando León's «Barrio» (Spain, 1998) tells the story of three adolescents who scratch a living on the streets and chase a dream – to escape from the area and, just like the protagonist in Les quatre cents coups,

see the sea.

In «Clandestinos» (Spain, 2007), Antonio Hens shows a teenager who spent his youth in and out of remand homes since he was abandoned as a boy. One time when he escapes, he meets up with an ETA terrorist who introduces him into a world of political violence.

## 2. The deprivation of socialization by isolation

Werner Herzog's «Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle» (Germany, 1975), is about a real-life character called Gaspar Hauser. He became a newspaper sensation when he emerged from a cave in 1824. He could hardly speak a word and soon became the object of scientific curiosity as he was almost an adult but virtually speechless and lacked physical coordination. Doctors declared that he was neither mad nor imbecile, but that forced separation from human contact from infancy had impeded his development. The boy quickly learnt to speak and read and write, and he eventually wrote the story of his early life. His education continued and he showed an aptitude for Philosophy, Latin and the Sciences. Popular belief

was that Gaspar was an illegitimate son of the royal house of Baden who had been removed in favour of another brother. His personal and social development was cut short when he was murdered five years later.

Anselm Von Feuerbach, a famous lawyer whose interest in Gaspar's case led him to support the hypothesis that he had been a disinherited royal, confirmed just how far the young man's life provoked a wide-ranging debate on many different levels, philosophical, psychological, political and moral. The lawyer classified Gaspar's early treatment as a crime, but in a new way, declaring it to be a «crime against the soul», a profound assault on the soul of a human being. Von Feuerbach specified two offences committed against Gaspar – illegal detention and abandonment.

«This crime against the soul is to separate Man from other rational beings and Nature, to prevent him from achieving his destiny as a human being and deprive him of spiritual nourishment. It is the worst of all crimes because it goes against Man's most fundamental birthright – freedom and search for spiritual satisfaction» (Von Feuerbach, 1997).

Von Feuerbach argues that Gaspar's initial backwardness was a case of social deprivation due to solitude. The belief that Man is not born but made was behind Feuerbach's attempt to restore to his pupil the spiritual goods taken away from him in infancy, and make him whole and a rounded citizen (Martínez-Salanova, 2009).

### 3. Depriving children of education: Padre Padrone

«Padre Padrone» (Italy, 1977), directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, is based on the autobiography of Gavino Ledda, a young shepherd who managed to escape the tyranny of a brutal father. There is a terrible scene in the film in which the enraged parent storms into a classroom and drags his son away to the mountains to force him to take care of the sheep. He terrorizes the teacher and other school boys, and threatens: «Today it's Gavino, tomorrow it will be your turn!» At 18, Gavino runs away from home and joins the army. There he becomes a sergeant and specialist in electronics. In 1961, he completes his secondary school education and enters the University of Rome, and today he is a distinguished linguist and author of several books.

The conflict between Gavino and his father is the pretext to examine other broader issues: a criticism of silence, the lack of education, total dependence, none of which are ascribed to any particular place or personality type but which are present in many parts of Europe (Ledda, 1977). It also looks to the future, to freedom from slavery through education, equal opportunity and the possibility for all to have access to the highest levels of education.

### 4. Boarding schools and re-education centres

The problems surrounding boarding schools, orphanages and remand homes are a common theme in cinema: the internment or expulsion of minors continues to be debated today. What to do with children who are sent to reform school and their education has long been dealt with in literature and was picked up by early cinema, with films about an education in crime and, in some cases, salvation at the hands of a wealthy family. The blind man who schools young boys in crime in «El lazarrillo de Tormes» is a picture of the picaresque of survival in a society that is hostile to those on the edge. The master pickpocket Fagin instructs Oliver in the fine arts of thieving in «Oliver Twist».

The child in the orphanage is senselessly mistreated or handed over to unscrupulous entrepreneurs who teach them a trade but at the expense of their freedom. There are several versions of Charles Dickens'

novel, and some date back to the early days of cinema.

These include David Lean's «Oliver Twist» (Great Britain, 1948) in which Alec Guinness plays Fagin in a dark sad tale of the pathetic lives led by lower-class children in a harsh age. Oliver is punished, manipulated, sold, whipped and persecuted in a world of thieves and ruffians. Oliver is brave, astute and knows how to survive in the face of evil. In the end, he gets his reward for so much suffering – the love of a family he has always yearned for. Another interesting version is Carol Reed's from 1968, which won five Oscars.

The latest version of «Oliver Twist» was produced in Great Britain, the Czech Republic, France and Italy in 2005 by Roman Polanski. It is a great moral parable that is more politically correct in terms of the anti-Semitism that features in the novel, and is more ambiguous about the goodness and malevolence of its characters, including Fagin (Ben Kingsley), who is allowed his moments of tenderness and doubt.

In 2009, a government report in Ireland revealed extensive sexual, emotional and physical abuse towards some 2,500 children in schools, orphanages, hospitals and reformatories run by the Catholic Church going back to 1940 (and even as far back as 1914). The Irish government and Catholic Church issued an apology and an archbishop resigned. These events had been covered up for decades despite public condemnation by Patrick Galvin in his autobiography «Song for a raggy boy», made into a film (Ireland, Great Britain, Denmark and Spain, 2003) of the same name by Aisling Walsh. The film relates the abuse suffered by Galvin at the hands of teachers at the church-run San Judas boarding school in 1939 who physically mistreated the children for the slightest infringement of the rules.

The main issue here is freedom of thought and expression within a dark, disturbing framework. This kind of story must be told, and cinema does so to the outrage of the very politicians and religious bodies that hid the truth.

Peter Mullan's «The Magdalene sisters» (Great Britain and Ireland, 2002) shows the physical, psychological and moral punishment meted out to the women and young girls at the Magdalene convents in Ireland, run by the Sisters of Mercy. The last convent was closed in 1996.

«Les Choristes» (France and Switzerland, 2004), directed by Christophe Barratier, is a film set in 1949 about reform schools in a post-World War II France racked by social conflict and poverty, in which many children are either orphaned or live precariously in families that can't make ends meet. The film brings together two opposing perspectives of reality, and thus

two different views of education, that enables us to see the advantages of a dialogue in education about punishment. Mathieu is an example of a teacher who tries to reach out to his pupils, in this case through music, to bring out the best in them.

### 5. The manipulation of conscience and behaviour

Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard made *Pygmalion* in 1938, based on the play by George Bernard Shaw, in which a professor carries out an experiment to convert a poor, virtually illiterate flower seller into a respectable lady in high society. It won the Oscar for best screenplay in the same year.

The confidence that one person has in another can enable the latter to achieve that most difficult of objective. This is the basis of the Pygmalion effect. As in mythology, it is the process by which the beliefs and expectations of one person in another affects the latter's behaviour to such an extent that it ends up confirming the validity of those very beliefs and expectations. But in reality, the effect is not always complete.

Dennis Gansel's «Die Welle» (Germany, 2008) is based on events that took place in the USA in 1967. It tells the story of a teacher's didactic experiment with his pupils over a five-day period that got out of hand. He had to abandon the experiment, which was meant to demonstrate the negative aspects of autocracy, because it had the opposite effect and ended in tragedy. The film was widely acclaimed at the Sundance Festival. It questions the freedom to teach, freedom of expression, the use and manipulation of certain didactic methods. The film highlights the dangers of a charismatic leader, a teacher, who channels potential youthful rebellion into abusing unity, friendship, loyalty, sacrifice and confidence by subjugating them to fanaticism.

In Lewis Gilbert's «Educating Rita» (Great Britain, 1983), the values of an anarchic and boozy professor are undermined by a young student (Julie Walters) who is a poorly educated hairdresser from a working-class neighbourhood. She yearns for change and to be somebody else. The film is a song to freedom in education, and is a journey through the dependence both have on their own criteria and experience. At the end of the film, we see how both professor and student have helped each other to change and free themselves from old ways of thinking.

### 6. The teacher's sense of commitment in difficult times

In «La lengua de las mariposas» (Spain, 1999), directed by José Luis Cuerda, a Republican teacher

deeply committed to education lives and works in a small village at the start of the Spanish Civil War. The film focuses on the relationship between an adult and a schoolboy who loves to learn and discover things. The teacher (Fernando Fernán Gómez) uses all his skills to convey his Republican ideas but his failure is reflected in a terrible finale when the pupil throws stones at him as he is led away to execution by the Falange.

The film examines various themes: friendship, school, childhood, the formative years of life, fear and terror, and the misery of the human condition. The historical events that serve as a backdrop clearly determine the lives of the protagonists, as the ending makes clear. The film harks back nostalgically to the ideas of freedom, hope and social change in the pedagogical ideas behind the Second Republic's intention that primary and secondary education be free for all. «Thanks to the Republic, us women can now vote», says Moncho's mother, as she denounces the irrational bestiality of those who brought the Republic down.

Stephen Daldry's «Billy Elliot» (Great Britain, 2000) is set in a mining village at a time when the government of Margaret Thatcher was battling striking miners. It is a harsh environment, especially for a boy who chooses to dance rather than box. The story is told with sensibility and musical style, and there are some memorable moments, one of which is when Billy dances frantically down the street only to crash into a brick wall. The film speaks of the triumph of perseverance and dedication in a very real way, with genuine characters not archetypes. His family is depicted in a sober light within the atmosphere of social and labour strife in which the story unfolds. The ballet teacher who encourages Billy by suggestion rather than interference ends up breaking down the family's hostility and the boy fulfils his dream.

### 7. The school's social responsibility

The school has social responsibilities; not only those assigned to it by law but those which anthropologically correspond to it as one of the pillars of culture for the people. The school must take charge of helping to change basic attitudes and improving the life of its community, concerning itself with its pupils' well-being and their families too, welcoming children from different cultures and backgrounds, accepting integration and differences of race and physical and mental ability, bringing down the physical and cultural barriers that affect pupils and parents alike, promoting good environmental practices, helping families to take on educational responsibilities and demanding that the

public authorities fulfil their own social responsibilities (Loscertales, 1999).

«Ça commence aujourd'hui» (France, 1999), directed by Bertrand Tavernier, is social cinema filmed in a documentary style about a small village in the north of France in which 30% of the 7,000 inhabitants are unemployed due to the decline of the mining sector. The schoolmaster of the kindergarten decides to take up the traditional struggle of those mining villages against the authorities and bureaucracy by enlisting the help of the community and the pupils' parents. His work as teacher is questioned. The film highlights the typical problems of a small industrial community: unemployment, alcoholism, family breakdown, abuse... and above all, the absence of all hope for the future that each of these problems reflects. The kindergarten thus becomes a refuge where the youngest can escape the harsh reality that surrounds them.

The director uses a lot of long takes and tracking shots to emphasise the documentary effect of the film, and thus creates a convincing sense of reality. The film criticises the indifference and bureaucratization of a social security system run by authorities that look the other way; the citizens who ask for handouts and pay lip service to Communism but vote for the extreme rightwing parties when they lose those benefits; a system that is passive and unconcerned about reality, and more interested in reports and technicalities than the problems of daily life. On the other hand, it is an optimistic film that calls on all the community to take responsibility, and shows that it is possible to improve the system from within.

## 8. Conflicts in a multiethnic society

Europe has become a multiethnic society and cinema reflects that fact in many films. Laurent Cantet, convinced that learning democracy is not as easy as it seems, directed «Entre les murs» (France, 2008) to chronicle life in a modern-day European classroom of 25 students of different nationalities who have not

chosen to be together but must study as a class for a year. In the film, just as in Europe, there are students of different ethnic backgrounds, languages and religions who learn to respect differences and display the best of their culture so that a future society can emerge in which respect, equality and tolerance prevail.

The reality of classroom life in a small village in the Auvergne region of northern France is the subject of the documentary «Être et avoir» (France, 2002) by Nicolas Philibert. The film portrays all aspects of life in the classroom: students doing course work, problem solving, learning values, rules, emotional education, fun and play, effort, discipline, coexistence and diversity. It is not a fictional film; it shows real people at work in front of a camera that they seem oblivious to. It is almost a fable capturing the essence of each character.

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