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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2022 Volume I: Children and Education in World Cinema

Introduction

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K-12 students have a comfortable and happy relation to films in their daily lives. Riding on that supposition, nine of us in this seminar examined the interface between World cinema and childhood education. We arrived speculating on the general analogies that can be drawn between cinema and education, especially when the films are foreign. The analogies begin when you realize that both films and teachers entice their "audiences" to follow them on a narrative journey leading to discoveries, while promising an exciting process along the way. Although the films we watched together always dealt with children, we discussed them not always (or only) for what they might impart to young audiences in the classroom, but mainly for what we as adult educators could learn from them about children, about knowledge-as-discovery, and about education. Foreign art films are challenging, which makes them perfect for this purpose, since education must find ways to bring students to deal with what is foreign and with what challenges them.

We began in France where both cinema and educational philosophy have been constantly and intensely debated. Francois Truffaut's 1959 *400 Blows* was the touchstone example we looked at first and returned to repeatedly. Its "script of delinquency," including improvisation from its 13-year-old subject, rubs up against the stodgy institution of French film in 1959, and at the same time puts on notice the social institutions (family, school, legal) that turn children into adults during adolescence. What are children, and what is cinema? These linked questions aim at freedom for both. Ten years later Truffaut's more theoretical and historical film, *The Wild Child* (1969), takes up the true story of an Enlightenment educator, Jean-Marc Itard, who in 1799 tried to civilize a genuinely savage 11-year-old. Itard, it turns out, forms a bridge from 18th century philosophy (Rousseau, Condillac) to Maria Montessori who recognized his efforts. The French pedagogical ideal, and the powerful Italian version she implanted internationally, open up fundamental questions about the status of children and methods of teaching them. While only a couple participants thought they would bring up such issues directly in their teaching, we all profited from taking this step back and looking at the enterprise, teaching, we are devoted to. Truffaut's films and others like them, dramatize and electrify such reflections. We then watched French educational philosophies in action, through a pair of award-winning documentaries, one (*The Class*) of an inner-city Parisian high school classroom, the other (*To Be and To Have*) of a one-room Alpine schoolhouse. It was important to realize that two such very different films (and models of teaching) co-exist in one country, so that as we moved from France to West Africa, Iran, Japan and China, we wouldn't be tempted to characterize entire national dispositions on the basis of the small evidence of one or a couple films.

Our students need to know that their neighborhood is not the only world on the globe. What kinds of stories are told about children in West Africa, Japan, France, China, or Iran, not to mention Ireland, South Asia and

other places we discussed? Learning about other cultures and other approaches to filmmaking, requires that we look at the world from very different perspectives. For stories populate worlds and do so from perspectives. What are the concerns of children in Iran, for instance, and how are those concerns treated and valued? The differences we found, of course, are often not so far-reaching after all. There are plenty of universals in the way children are treated and stories about them are told because so much of human experience is common to us all. The interplay between similarities and differences in the films we encountered and in the methods of filmmaking that made them look the way they do, can bring students to an awareness about their own situations as well as those of others with whom, over the duration of a movie, the empathize.

The availability of foreign films, thanks to film festivals, streaming services and DVDs, makes for a fantastic reservoir of stories, allowing our seminar to became a forum for film analysis and criticism as well as for discussions of teaching. In the units written for the seminar, most Fellows took up the challenge of incorporating films into their strategies and often into their objectives, because films can be both attractive to students and can serve as tools in helping them locate elements of stories. Foreign films tempt us to go beyond stories to the texture of the world they depict. And so the poetic details that crop up in such films, as well as the rhythm felt through actions, music and silence, can make us realize how much we are bound by our own Hollywood conventions. While all the films we discussed involved the lives of children, we distinguished those told from a child's viewpoint, from others that were told by an adult narrator. And we looked into the special status of certain kinds of storytellers that certain films literally depicted or imitated. The African *griot* served as the example we spent most time on, in part because griots still tell (or sing) stories in contemporary Africa, and in part because their attitude toward the entire function of storytelling differs so markedly from the novelist we are used to in American culture, and in the West generally.

The griot readily combines the overlapping functions we were intent to link. The griot is a repository of cultural and practical knowledge and thus stands as an educator. The Griot in *Keita* explicitly gives history lessons to the young boy, Mabo, who then has trouble reconciling these lessons with what he is learning in his classroom where a French view of history prevails. But the Griot is also an entertainer around whom the locals gather in the evening as if he were projecting a film. This West African case raises the question of different forms of participation in films and in education. How much control should the griot (the teacher) exert? How much "call and response" leads to independent ideas rather than rote learning? The film director, like the teacher, establishes a relation to those addressed that assigns them roles and responsibilities. It can be liberating for students to recognize those roles and to argue about what they mean socially and politically.

With its sixty-year history of making serious films for and about children in its national film institute, Iran proves to be an especially rich place to examine. It is also special since politically it is at odds with the USA, while its artists and filmmakers work around strict censorship regulations. Since the mid-1980s their filmmakers have consistently dazzled Western critics, and mainly with films involving children. The films are never dogmatic and invariably clever, reflective, and ambiguous. Some, like *Turtles can Fly*, are too dispiriting to show in most of our classrooms, but they are all worth the attention we give them, for they strip childhood down to its essentials and observe it in conflict with the institutions that try to shape it. Iran's literary culture is based less on storytelling than on poetry, making their films visionary, and dreamlike in their use of repetition, framing, and resonance. For instance, the trips taken by the little boy up and over the hill to the neighboring village in *Where is the Friend's House*, are like rhyming lines in stanzas. The carefully designed patterns of each location, the images of clothes hanging on the line, of babies crying, of water spilling from a balcony, of wind rising in the night while dogs bark, become memorable through repetition. The key images are those that open and closes the film: a classroom from the point of view of a young boy who is both eagerly expectant and afraid. All the Iranian films we watched seem to operate through variants of this tension.

Films such as these were balanced by the grotesque Japanese satire, *Family Game*, making us understand that "childhood and cinema" should not be treated as a genre. This is the point made by Vicky Lebeau in a book of that title which shows that the subject of children can be richly mined by many genres, some sentimental, some comic, some harshly realist, some allegorical. The films we chose to dwell on made us think deeply and differently about what makes a good film and what makes for good education. They were, to repeat, foreign and challenging.

Many of the units produced by the Fellows took up one or several of the films we collectively discussed. But even those units that aimed at adjacent topics drew on the approaches and vocabulary our analyses exemplified. One unit focuses on the issue of young girls growing into self-confident agents for change, by comparing the Disney film *Encanto*, set in Columbia, with a rare Saudi film (*Wadjida*). Another unit, featuring tales of children migrating north to the USA and focusing on two films we did not take up, nevertheless employs tools we developed when discussing *The Runner* and *Abouna,* films about children living in precarious, unstable situations. A unit for very young children aims to help them identify emotions in popular films like *Inside Out* and *Shrek*, but only after exposing the students to the foreign faces of the Chinese characters of *Not One Less* and the Iranian ones of *Where is the Friend's House*, and finding that in fact they are legible.

These and all the units rely, sometimes explicitly on a key book in the theory of cinematic pedagogy by noted French film theorist, Alain Bergala. His *The Cinema Hypothesis* does not bargain with administrators or with students. He admonishes teachers to take films seriously and submit themselves (and their students) to the unpredictable, mysterious, always ambiguous power of strong films. He concludes by offering ways to incorporate both film reviewing and filmmaking in the classroom for those teachers ready to help students exploit their creative potential. One unit thus aims at film reviewing as a final achievement, while another, on Music Videos, challenges students to develop brief, but potent and imaginative clips after they learn the history and elements of this mode of image=production. For a different unit in her art classroom, one Fellow will deploy the terms of our film analyses (framing, mise-en-scene, etc.) to prepare high school students for future creative work.

Our seminar recognized the uphill struggle good cinema and good education demand. Art films, particularly foreign ones, are increasingly lost in the new entertainment economy of streaming and of social media. Will we, or our students, take time to concentrate on films that derive from other traditions and aim to shift what we notice, feel, and value? As for education, can the dedicated teacher, rather like the passionate film auteur, stand up to the demands and regulations of institutionalized education that increasingly emphasizes pre-established outcomes and methods? The units prepared by the Fellows in the seminar "Children and Education in World Cinema" are betting on the freedom, rigor, calculated improvisation, and sensitivity that we observed again and again the films that gave us such pleasure to watch and talk about.
