

Images of teachers in Hollywood cinema
(Part 1)

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1. Introduction: objectives and limits of this Dossier

In this Dossier we will take a look at how Hollywood cinema has represented teachers, particularly high school teachers, in the past few decades, starting from the '50s. We will examine movies which see teachers as the main characters, as well as movies in which teachers, although playing a secondary role, are figures worthy of consideration.

*We shall focus only on Hollywood films, since the analysis of films coming from other countries would imply a complex socio-cultural comparison which is beyond the scope of this Dossier. As a matter of fact, as we shall soon see, any analysis of teachers' images cannot ignore the school system in which they work, and, more generally, the culture they belong to (and which cinema helps to define). However, this does not mean that what we will say cannot be applied to other contexts too: more specifically, the conceptual categories we will use to carry out our analysis can be adopted or adapted to analyze in a similar way how cinema in other countries helps to define teachers' images in each socio-cultural context. Besides, at a more superficial level, readers will have no problems in making comparisons and find out links with teachers' images in their own countries. (The *Want to know more?* section at the end of the Dossier suggests a few additional references).*

2. The role of movies in building mental images

Teachers' images are perceptions and mental representations which each of us builds with respect to these figures (as well as with respect to any element of the social context in which we live). We are talking about beliefs, i.e. cognitive constructions, strictly linked to attitudes, i.e. affective dispositions, for example acceptance or refusal, agreement or disagreement, positive or negative judgment. These beliefs, attitudes and relevant expectations are socially shared, and constitute an important part of the folk culture of each individual society. (See the Dossier [Expectations, attitudes and strategies: a bridge between screen and audience.](#))

"Movies and other popular media define reality and play a key role in shaping history. This is done ... in the very selection of a movie theme in that it sends a powerful message to the members of

society about what is important. Moreover ... the substance of a film serves as a filter through which our values are examined and our perceptions shaped ... consciously or not, films serve as an expression of our values and often stir deep seated passions. And some films ... have the power to work their way into our collective dreamscape and permanently alter the way we perceive and interpret our life and times" (Note 1).

Any topic dealt with in a film is never neutral, both for the fact that it has been selected among others and for how it is treated. Cinema, like many other media and expressive forms, on the one hand reflects the images of our collective subconscious, and on the other hand helps to shape and modify these very images through the representations it offers. We should not forget that cinema (and particularly Hollywood cinema) is, first of all, a productive market, in which the choice of films to be produced, and the ways in which they are produced, depend mostly on the interest they can potentially arouse in the relevant audience (or audiences): for example, in the past decades teachers' figures have proven to be one of the greatest attractions for the (pre)adolescent market, which makes up for the the most important audience in the USA (and, at the same time, the greatest social group teachers themselves are supposed to care for).

"Seldom are made-in-Hollywood films about teachers accurate about what happens in schools and teachers; they are not supposed to capture how teachers actually teach or students behave. These films are expected to make money. But they do something else that is less obvious: they express larger social anxieties that Americans feel about education" (Note 2).

3. "Scenarios" and contexts in movies about teachers

Freedom writers (by Richard Lagravenese, USA 2006)

Two typical "scenarios" of Hollywood movies about teachers have (a bit provocatively) been suggested:

- in the first scenario, "Idealistic teacher, fresh out of college, gets first teaching job, preferably at hellish inner-city school. Encounters "difficult" students and cynical colleagues. Tries teaching methods learned in school, to no avail. On the verge of giving up when breakthrough occurs with students. Discovers he or she is a "natural" teacher after all. Decides to sign up for another year";

- in the second scenario, "Idealistic, gifted teacher runs afoul of the administration by teaching students more than just facts and figures. This leads to tragic incident, for which teacher gets blamed. Principal (or headmaster) fires teacher, restoring school to "proper" order" (Note 3)

It is also true that in the past few decades teachers' images have somewhat changed, but in the sense that they are often identified with negative figures, both from a personal and a professional viewpoint: witness movies like School of rock, Bad Teacher and Half Nelson (which we shall mention later), which at least partially seem to correspond to widespread feelings of failure and inefficiency of both teachers and the school system as a whole. Teachers in such movies can even be represented as violent characters or comic caricatures ...

In any way, in the typical "scenarios" of many Hollywood movies, the contexts in which teachers work are as important as teachers' personal characteristics (if not more important). As a matter of fact, a teacher's figure cannot be analysed without considering the type of school and its relative socio-cultural position within the American school system. In a few words, we can say that there

are three main types of high school in the USA (which are also portrayed in movies): inner-city schools, attended by a variety of ethnic groups and social classes in more or less deteriorated sociocultural contexts; suburban schools, attended mostly by middle-class, white American students; and private schools or "élite" colleges, whose main aim is to prepare students for university.

Despite the huge diversity of these contexts, they share a common element: the ethics of individualism, which is typical of American society, and particularly of its middle class. What is expected from students in all these schools is that they get results thanks to their commitment, their sense of responsibility and the motivation they are supposed to possess, despite the difficulties most of them have to overcome: from their families' lack of comprehension and indifference to their classmates' apathy, from the inefficiency of schools to the limits due to poor social conditions and ethnic and social conflicts. However, if we look beyond these common features, huge differences are obvious according to the type of school a movie is set in.

4. "Elite" schools and suburban schools

[Dead poets' society \(by Peter Weir, USA 1989\)](#)

In "élite" schools, attended by the upper class population, students are called to face challenges which are different from the ones that prevail in inner-city schools, where ethnic and social conflicts are the norm. In the former schools, the conflict seems to be identified with the rigid objectives of academic success (such schools' main task is to prepare students for university entrance - possibly prestigious universities) and the students' need of autonomy, independence and free expression. Such students are often oppressed by family demands, obliged to follow a strict discipline and to identify with the restrictions which are part and parcel of the social class they belong to. Therefore, the "good" teacher often identifies with an "outsider" with respect to the school system - someone who tries hard to go beyond the limits of the traditional curriculum to help her/his students to express their personality and potentialities to the best, even against the rules imposed by the system and backed up by the families. Perhaps no movie has portrayed such a context better than *Dead poet's society*, with its hero, Professor Keating, who literally fascinates his students with his alternative methods and his yearning for freedom and creativity.

[Election \(by Alexander Payne, USA 1999\)](#)

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

On the other hand, in the so-called "suburban" schools, attended by middle-class students, the issue at stake is not so much academic success as student's desire to free themselves from their parents' oppression - parents who are anxious to ensure that their children reach at least the same level of life quality that they so successfully enjoy - as well as from the conformism of the school context, which students themselves share. Movies in such contexts often focus on the students, on their effort to overcome the myths of "popularity" and "school status" to find their own identity against the authoritarian pressure of their parents and their school. In the first sequence above, from *Election*, Professor McAllister introduces himself as a teacher satisfied with his job and dedicated to his student's well-being ("I couldn't do anything else in my life"): his aim is to arouse his students' interests, to try to train them to think, "preparing them for the difficult ethical and moral choices that they would have to make once they grow up". His antagonist then becomes Tracy, a "social

climber", ready to do anything to reach her objectives: we see her always and immediately raising her hand to answer the teacher's questions. In the second sequence, Professor McAllister tries to convince a student to run for the position of students' council president, right against Tracy, who is at the moment the only candidate. McAllister explains: "One person assured of victory kind of undermines the whole idea of democracy, don't you think? ... I mean that'd more like dictatorship, like we studied", then he has recourse to a metaphor: "If all you ever knew were apples ... but then one day there's an orange ... and now you can make a decision ... that's democracy". In these "suburban" schools, the teacher's role is to stimulate critical consciousness and a greater participation in school's democratic life.

5. Inner-city schools and what they need ...

Blackboard jungle (by Richard Brooks, USA 1955)

However, it is about "inner-city schools" that Hollywood cinema has produced most movies, starting from the '50s. As we said, this kind of schools is generally to be found in deteriorated urban districts which are in poor socio-economic conditions and are largely populated by different ethnic minorities (Afro-Americans, Latin-Americans, Puertoricans, etc.) - districts which witness daily violence and sharp contrasts, often between youth gangs, linked to drug pushing, prostitution, and other illegal markets. "Hollywood's depiction of urban life and urban schools generally reflects the culture-of-poverty thesis. This view holds that residents of poor inner-city neighborhoods are poor not because they face racial and/or class discrimination or because they lack access to stable employment opportunities. Rather, it is argued that urban poor are impoverished because they have the wrong values and the wrong attitudes about school, work, and family" (Note 4)

The values and attitudes of these segments of population prevent them from adopting the middle-class life ideals and thus from integrating themselves into the dominating culture, which entails material aims, a rational frame of mind, self-reliance and a belief in the effectiveness of personal effort in reaching success. In this way we are shown that such "dysfunctional" values and attitudes have nothing to do with the socio-cultural condition of the context, which are often the result of limited investment in infrastructures, health, education, and so on. Therefore, we are supposed to believe that this kind of problems can be solved through individual efforts rather than with structured public action. As President George W. Bush remarked, "Much of today's poverty has more to do with troubled lives than a troubled economy. And often when a life is broken, it can only be restored by another caring, concerned human being" (Note 5)

*And who can be a "caring, concerned human being" better than a "good teacher"? Just as the one who in *The blackboard jungle* faces what is implied in the same title of the movie ... (which, by the way, is also famous because for the first time in movie history the musical score included a rock song, *Rock around the clock*, by Bill Haley).*

6. The "good" teacher

How does Hollywood cinema represents the "good" teacher - or, to be more precise, the teacher who is most suitable to deal with the difficult situations of inner-city schools? Dalton (1995) gives a detailed description: "Typically, he or she is an outsider who is usually not well-liked by other teachers, who are typically bored by students, afraid of students, or eager to dominate students. The 'good teacher' gets involved with students on a personal level, learns from those students, and does

not usually fare very well with administrators. Sometimes these 'good' teachers have a ready sense of humor. They also frequently personalize the curriculum to meet everyday needs in their students' lives" (Note 6). In the following paragraphs we will follow Dalton's line of thought.

6a. The "good" teacher is an outsider

[School of rock \(by Richard Linklater, USA 2003\)](#)

The typical Hollywood teacher is often an "outsider" with respect to the system. She/He can have had other experiences, or be a professional person who, for economic reasons, decides to teach "as a makeshift", for lack of something better. This, although describes them as people who have no previous teaching experience, does not prevent them from doing their job in an excellent way, up to the point that they eventually discover that they are "born teachers" and decide to stay in the school they were sent to.

This is the case, for example, of Prof. Thackery, who, in [To Sir with love](#) (by James Clavell, USA 1967), though having a prestigious degree, cannot find any job and thus accepts a teaching post; Prof. Dadier in [Blackboard jungle](#) (by Richard Brooks, USA 1955) resigns himself to teaching in an urban school while searching for a better position; Prof. Escalante (Edward James Olmos) in [Stand and deliver](#) (by Ramon Menendez, USA 1988) gives up a prestigious job in a big company in order to teach a class of Latin-Americans; Prof. Shoupe (Mark Harmon) in [Summer school](#) (by Carl Reiner, USA 1987) is a Physical Education teacher obliged to teach English in a summer remedial course; Prof. Holland (Richard Dreyfuss) in [Mr Holland's opus](#) (by Stephen Herek, USA 1995) is an ambitious musician who, while labouring to compose a magnificent symphony, resigns himself to teaching in a small town's high school; Prof. Finn (Jack Black) in [School of rock](#) (see above) is a musician who, after being kicked out of his own band, takes up a temporary teacher's job in a prestigious school; not to mention Detective Kimball (Arnold Schwarzenegger) who in [Kindergarten cop](#) (by Ivan Reitman, USA 1990) starts teaching in a nursery school in order to be able to catch a drug pusher.

In all these cases, the teacher, though having an inadequate if not non-existent teaching experience, according to the individualist model we mentioned before, ends up being successful and becoming a "fully qualified" teacher. The message that all these examples of weird (but at the same time enlightened and fascinating) teachers sends the audience, however, is very ambiguous: non-professional teachers seem to "work" better than their colleagues, as if, after all, anybody, with a bit of good sense and a lot of commitment, could teach, and teach "well".

6b. The "good" teacher gets involved with her/his students at a personal level

[Conrack \(by Martin Ritt, USA 1974\)](#)

"Good" teachers, when placed in difficult if not desperate situations, soon realize that their teaching cannot be effective if they first do not build a personal relationship with their students - one which takes into account their starting level and the context in which they live. To this end, they aim to build a non-threatening, cooperative class climate, allowing students to express themselves and their problems, and even letting themselves to be involved at a personal level. Such attitudes are obviously not accepted by their colleagues and headmasters (as we shall soon see), since they break with tradition and start up an open conflict with the daily lazy routine which involves all school activities.

For example, Prof. Dunn (Diane Keaton), in *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (by Richard Brooks, USA 1977) teaches in a school for deaf-mute students and does not hesitate to break school norms in order to obtain hearing aids which her students need; Prof. Gruwell (Hilary Swank) in *Freedom writers* has to overcome her students' strong confrontation, their open hostility and their prejudices, and to this end tries to build a personal relationship with them; Prof. Conroy (Jon Voigt), in *Conrack* (see above) does everything he can to fight his students' situation of poverty and ignorance, and soon organizes school trips and fondles them in class, thus sharing with them not just ideas and concepts, but first and foremost his personal warmth and the intimacy of a personal relationship. Movies about coaches also abound. Coaches are important figures in American high schools and sports centres: in [Any given Sunday](#) (by Oliver Stone, USA 1999), for example, coach D'Amato (Al Pacino) in violent opposition to the owner of the team, persuades his players to give their best with a series of talks and exhortations which show his personal commitment and involvement.

However, the teacher-student relationship is not one-way: teachers happen to learn something from their students. It is not uncommon in several movies that the "transformation" that a particularly brilliant student undergoes, thanks to his/her teacher, is reflected back to the teacher herself/himself, who then becomes more aware of her/his own self and the route she/he wants to take. This is what happens in *Blackboard jungle* between the student-leader Miller (Sidney Poitier) and his teacher, Prof. Dadier (Glenn Ford): if Miller doesn't leave school (as he intended to do) but will continue his studies, Prof. Dadier, too, will remain at the same school, giving up his search for a better job. And eventually Miller says to his teacher, "I guess everyone learns something in school - even teachers". In this way the "catharsis" that such teachers seem to operate, particularly towards a few sensitive and endowed students, concerns their own selves and their personality.

6c. The "good" teacher often comes into conflict with colleagues and the institution

[Dangerous minds \(by John N. Smith, USA 1995\)](#)

Being "outsiders" with respect to the school system and its rigid conventions, "good" teachers inevitably find themselves in more or less violent contrast with their colleagues: these are often described as apathetic or even cynical people who are resigned to a routine work with no result for their students, or are openly opposed to any change leading to a modification of the status quo or requiring them to question or challenge their ways of doing. As one of these teachers from [Up the down staircase](#) (by Robert Mulligan, USA 1967) summarizes her pedagogical philosophy, "You keep them off the streets and you give them a bit of fun and you've earned your keep." In such contexts, cooperation between colleagues is virtually impossible, and it is seldom that we find teachers acting beyond the narrow limits of their class in Hollywood cinema.

The same can be said of the relationship between the "good" teacher and her/his headmaster, and, more generally, the school as an institution, which is often represented by headmasters/managers who are only concerned with maintaining order and discipline and getting teachers to strictly adhere to the official "curriculum", so that students can get good marks in the standardized tests which measure academic success (and, in a school system, like the American one, featuring high competition between schools, the success of their school and the relevant financial resources).

In *Dangerous minds* (see above), Prof. Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer), after spending a few years in the Marines, finds herself teaching in a high school and having to face a violent, almost delinquent,

class. Without getting discouraged, the teacher realizes that the official "syllabus" is very far from her students' interests and character and does not hesitate to make alternative, even radical, choices, like teaching karate in class. In the sequence above, we see her facing her headmaster, who reminds her of her institutional duties and invites her to follow the school "curriculum" with no changes or alternatives. Needless to say, Prof. Johnson will continue teaching with her innovative methods and will change her hoodlum/punk students into a class of brilliant students.

Freedom writers (by Richard Lagravenese, USA 2006)

Prof. Gruwell (Hilary Swank) too, in *Freedom writers*, must face the institution's open hostility: we see her in the first sequence, as she is defending her programme with her headmaster, who has got used to managing a school full of students with learning disabilities, who live in poor conditions and often come from reform schools or are subject to probation. This is, on the contrary, the context where Prof. Gruwell has deliberately chosen to teach, by selecting a school which offers, at least formally, a programme of "integration". Even after she has had good results with her students, the teacher must face the headmaster's, as well as her colleagues', opposition; in the second sequence, we see her trying to stand up for her position with the school district's manager.

The juxtaposition between the "good" teacher and the school as an institution is of course at the heart of the dramatic development of these movies, towards an (almost) inevitable happy ending, but in itself does not imply a really "alternative" and innovative political vision. The teacher and the institution speak two different languages and are bound to not understand (or misunderstand) each other - no true dialogue is therefore possible. The change that the teacher manages to achieve concerns her/his class only, her/his students, but does not involve anybody else, and thus has no implication whatsoever for a real transformation of the context.

6d. The "good" teacher personalizes the curriculum for her/his students

To Sir, with love (by James Clavell, GB 1967)

"Good" teachers realize the difficult contexts in which they happen to work and are usually very flexible: they put aside with no hesitations the official "syllabus" or curriculum and first and foremost try to build a climate of trust with their students. They set up activities close to their interests and which somehow recognize the peculiar nature of their problems and of the difficult situations that they have to face inside, but mostly outside, the school.

In *To Sir, with love* (see above), which, however, is an English movie, Prof Thackery (Sidney Poitier) suddenly realizes that his students are only children, and that must be his starting point: he comes into the classroom and, to everybody's surprise, throws the books into the waste basket: "Those are of no use, or at least are of no use to you ... from now on you will be treated as adults by me and by each other ... we are just going to talk, you and I ...". Then, when a student arrives late and comes into the classroom almost shouting, without greeting or apologizing, Thackery obliges her to go out and come back "as an adult, a lady with dignity". Then he goes on, listing the "courtesies" that will have to be shown by everybody: how they must address each other, how girls should behave, then how boys should ... "What are we going to talk about, Sir?", asks a boy, and Thackery answers, "We'll talk about life ... love ... work ... death ... sex ... marriage ... revolutions ... we'll talk about anything you want ...". This is clearly a "syllabus" which is quite different from the one Thackery is supposed to teach. His "syllabus" is made up, at the same time, of precise rules and an open view of the world, of teacher's authority, of friendship and affect, of mutual responsibility.

[Children of a lesser God \(by Randa Haines, USA 1986\)](#)

In Children of a lesser God, Prof. Leeds (William Hurt), who teaches a class of deaf-mutes, starts his lesson in silence, thus disconcerting his students. Then, pretending to faint, catches their attention, at the same time asking them how many can read lips .. then he asks them for a good reason why they should learn to talk. "To pick up a girl", answers a student. The teacher picks up on this to put up a sort of "role game": he sits two girls (who must pretend they can talk) opposite two boys (who must try to communicate with them). Then, standing upside down, asks the students how they would manage in that position to ask someone to give them back some money: "You couldn't use your hands, you should talk ...". Clearly, by using verbal language, a bit of sign language and a lot of "physical" action, Prof Leeds tries to motivate his students starting from where they are, getting them out of their apathy and maybe, resignation.

[Take the lead \(by Liz Friedlander, USA 2005\)](#)

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

Obviously, the need to ensure an enjoyable "show" sometimes leads film scripts to (almost) implausible - if not ludicrous - moments: in Take the lead, Prof. Dulaine (Antonio Banderas), a French-Latin-American teacher of ballroom dancing, happens to be put in charge of a bunch of poor, maladjusted boys and girls during a sort of "detention" period. Given his preparation, he thinks he can "seduce" them by showing them a fascinating tango number (Video 1): the first step in connecting with their world and, later on, as we have seen in most Hollywood movies, in "redeeming" them and even getting them to take part in a ballroom contest ...

However, Hollywood does not give up sending out a pedagogical message, and in this case offers us a particularly clear example of the "image" that movies like this one convey. In Video 2, Prof. Dulaine must defend himself, in front of a meeting of the parents-teachers association, when accused of wasting time with a "totally unproductive" activity, and launches his message: "To do something, anything, is hard ... it's much easier to blame your father, your mother, the environment, the government, the lack of money ... but even if you find a place to assign the blame, it doesn't make the problems go away ... I'm trying something new ... I'm trying ...". Then he invites the headmaster to dance with him and says, "If she allows me to lead, she's trusting me ... but more than that, she's trusting herself ... What I do here, in this school, I teach dance, and with it a set of rules, and we teach your kids more respect, teamwork, and dignity ... and that will help to give them a vision of the future they could have ...".

7. A temporary conclusion

As we already mentioned, Hollywood movies often share the "theory of poverty": the causes of social maladjustment, of learning disabilities, of the missing ethnic and cultural integration are not to be found in the ruling class's political choices, but in the students' and their families' missing adherence to the traditional values of American middle class: individualism, commitment, motivation, self-sacrifice, etc. Although in the past few decades movies have shown an increasing criticism of inefficient teachers and of a bureaucratic, unproductive school system, there is still the belief that it is enough to have enlightened teachers (or rather, "superteachers") who, even without an appropriate professional preparation, are ready to devote all their life to their students, by providing even uncommon teaching practices, so that they can help them to access those very values of the ruling class which are the key to personal success in a highly competitive and meritocratic society. This is why Hollywood teachers, although they reach exceptional aims with a

single class (and sometimes even with a single student) never really carry out a radical political action which may question the status quo and the ruling conformism: the viewers who are the target of these movies can be moved when watching these "uplifting" stories, but can also peacefully leave the theatre, being sure that the deep dimensions of the institutional structure have not been injured.

By and large, then, the "happy ending" which appears in many Hollywood movies is often an ambiguous one: "The well-intentioned middle-class reformer ultimately succeeds just when failure seems imminent. Success, however, is measured not by any institutional or social changes, but by the adoration of the students for the teacher-hero. With such admiration from the students, the "compassionately conservative" teacher-hero continues to work with the students. This is the moment of truth in these movies—proof to the teacher-hero that the students have been successfully reformed. They have progressed from lower-class animals to respectable middle-class students who finally understand and appreciate the efforts of their middle-class hero. Their troubled lives have been compassionately transformed by a caring and concerned human being" (Note 4)

End of Part 1

Notes

1. Burbach H.J., Figgins M.A. 1993. "A thematic profile of the images of teachers in film", *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2.
2. Cuban L. 2015. "From superhero teacher to bad teacher: Hollywood films then and now (Part 1), <https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2015/05/28/from-superhero-teacher-to-bad-teacher-hollywood-films-then-and-now/>
3. Hill D. 1995. "Tinseltown teachers: A guide to teachers in film", *Education Week Teacher*, March 1st, <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/1995/03/01/6tinsel.h06.html>
4. Bulman R.C. 2002. "Teachers in the 'hood: Hollywood's middle-class fantasy", *The Urban Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3, <https://theavarnagroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Teachers-in-the-Hood.pdf>
5. Hutcheson R. 2001. "Bush calls for faith-based "assault on poverty", *Sacramento Bee*, p. A-15
6. Dalton M.M. 1995. "The Hollywood Curriculum: who is the 'good' teacher?", *Curriculum Studies*, 3:1, pp. 23-44, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0965975950030102>



Want to know more?

- * From *Larry Ferlazzo's Websites of the Day*:
 - [The best places to learn about \(and view video clips of\) teachers in the movies](#)
- * From *College English*:
 - [Indecent proposals: Teachers in the movies](#) by D.M.Bauer
- * From the *IMDb* website:
 - [Movies involving Portrayals of Real Life Teachers](#) by zzzorf
- * From the *Oswego State University of New York* website:
 - [Representation of teachers in 60 years of film: A database promoting critical analysis of teacher image with regard to race, class, and gender](#) by B.Beyerbach
- * From the *Universal Journal of Educational Research*:
 - [Teachers in Film: Inspiration for Autonomous and Transformative Teaching or a Warning against It?](#) by O.Schwarz-Franco
- * From the *Grantland* website:
 - [Polishing the apple: What "Dangerous Minds" and other movies get right and wrong about teachers](#) by S.Serrano
- * See also the [Notes](#) above.

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