

## *Images of teachers in Hollywood cinema (Part 2)*

Luciano Mariani [info@cinemafocus.eu](mailto:info@cinemafocus.eu)

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### **1. Re-introduction**

*As we stressed in [Part 1](#), this Dossier is based on the belief that "cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a film-maker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned" (Note 1) and that "strong popular narratives can shape the way viewers as individuals ... understand the world around us and its possibilities or restrictions. Storytelling, especially in film, changes in response to the social, cultural and political concerns and interests of the time, as it also shapes that environment. The most powerful films reflect the world back to us and therefore they can become a battleground over interpretations of the social world" (Note 2).*

*As for teachers, then, we should not forget that their figures are part of our daily life, since all of us are or have been students (and maybe even teachers), and we have relatives or friends who are students or teachers: there is thus a sort of intertextuality between the mental images of teachers that each of us has acquired, during her/his experiences, and the representations provided by a movie: we cannot say how much the former affect the latter, and viceversa.*

*Starting from such premises, we have examined how Hollywood has represented the "good teacher" during a long stretch of its history. But what about the "bad" teacher?*

*Before resuming our exploration, we should remember that the images of teachers provided by movies are often monodimensional: teachers' personalities often lack depth and psychological subtlety, despite the fact that we may understand their professional ambitions; their interests appear limited and strictly confined to the school context; even their sentimental life is absent or scarcely visible - all in all, they appear as isolated figures, without any relationships or supporting figures they can rely on. But above all, what is not shown is, paradoxically, what they do in their classrooms, apart from their declarations of principles and their interpersonal relationships with students, which are often described in detail. If we think, as we should, of teachers as professionals, and if we compare them with other professional figures who often feature in movies, the difference is crystal clear: while finance tycoons, medical doctors, lawyers, not to mention inspectors or police detectives, are shown as they are actually engaged in their work, the teacher's actual*

*teaching is absent or just sketched out (with due exceptions, as we saw in Part 1). Obviously, a teacher's daily routine in the classroom has nothing glamorous, and does not lend itself to form the basis of that dramatic development of the story which is one of the main features of classical Hollywood cinema.*

## **2. The "bad" teacher**

*In contrast to their "good" colleagues, "bad" teachers rarely feature as main characters in Hollywood movies, but often play supporting roles, often as secondary characters, or "antagonists" to their "good" colleagues, whose virtues they help to highlight. In a way, the "bad" teachers can be defined by turning the positive features of "good" teachers into negative ones: they do not establish personal relationships with their students, but are often bored or annoyed by them, or are afraid of them, or wish to dominate them. In this sense, they rarely find reasons to fight with their colleagues or principals, since they are part and parcel of the institution and of its aims to control students. As for the curriculum, they totally concentrate on their subject-matter and on assessing the quality of their pupils' tangible results: their role is to efficiently transmit and assess knowledge rather than to act as educators in a wider sense. Thus they share a "scientific" or "technical" vision of learning, in its most restrictive sense: students' work is based on activities which should take them to reach carefully specified objectives, often in behavioural terms, with no consideration for either individual differences or the deeper cognitive, affective and social aspects of learning.*

*In the past few decades Hollywood cinema has switched from an almost exclusive representation of "good" teachers to the depiction of teachers who are not up to their role or even plainly disruptive for their students. These representations often offer a background of dysfunctional schools, thus reflecting a consistent part of public opinion, which sees teachers as inefficient and the public school system as expensive, bureaucratic and unproductive. The teachers featuring in many movies starting from the '80s are not just committed people, even ready to sacrifice themselves for their students, but also people with negative, if not explicitly violent, attitudes, or (and it is the other side of the same coin) comical characters, described in terms of irony if not sarcasm.*

## **3. Apathy, authoritarianism, irony, sarcasm**

**Ferris Bueller's day off (by John Hughes, USA 1986)**

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

*In Video 1 from Ferris Bueller's day off, the teacher gives his "lecture" in a bored and pompous tone, while his students listen (?) to him, or rather, sleep, daydream or think about something else ... It is clear that the teacher is not interested in either how the students "receive" his lecture or in establishing any sort of personal relationship with them. In Video 2, too, the teacher calls the roll in a monotonous and absent-minded tone: he keeps repeating the name of a student who is obviously not at his place, and does not stop calling out his name even after a girl has made a remark about it ...*

**Fast times at Ridgmont High (by Amy Heckerling, USA 1982)**

*In this sequence from Fast times at Ridgmont High, the teacher is handing out the students' tests, which have all got negative marks, and, facing his students' general lack of interest and apathy,*

keeps reminding them of some historical facts that they obviously failed to remember and quote in the tests. When he notices that a boy is absent, he starts giving the students a lecture on playing truant, when suddenly the boy (a very young Sean Penn) comes into the classroom, apologizing for being late because ... there was a long queue at the canteen. The teacher takes up this point to continue his "lecture" and asks the boy why he insists on wasting his precious time. "I don't know", answers the boy, and the teacher writes this on the blackboard, telling him that he will leave it there as an answer that the student will get whenever he asks him whether he will pass him ...

#### **Teachers (by Arthur Hiller, USA 1984)**

In *Teachers*, Prof. Jurrell gives his lesson sitting at his desk, with the students' desks facing off from him, so that he sits behind them and they never see him. When they come into the classroom, they take handouts from the teacher's desk, fill them out and put them back on the teacher's desk at the end of the class. In the meantime, the teacher reads a paper, but in practice he actually sleeps and even snores. We then see him talking to a colleague, who remarks that his (Jurrell's) students are always bored, to which Jurrell readily answers that he has won three consecutive awards for having the most orderly class ... When one day he has a stroke behind his open paper, nobody in the classroom notices it, the students go out of the classroom as usual, and only after a while we see some nursing staff, who can only establish that he is dead. The school nurse, sitting at a student's desk facing Jurrell's own desk, asks, "Really? How can you tell?" ...

#### **A beautiful mind (by Ron Howard, USA 2001)**

In this sequence from *A beautiful mind*, a biography of the mathematician John Forbes Nash, a Nobel prize for economics, we see Prof. Nash entering the classroom (he is late, as the clock clearly shows), looking at his students and commenting with sarcasm, "The eager young minds of tomorrow". When he refuses to keep the windows open, despite the deafening noise coming from street works, he answers the students' complaints about the heat, "Your comfort comes second to my ability to hear my own voice". Then he throws the handbook into the waste basket and starts writing a complex problem on the blackboard, remarking in the meantime, "Personally, I think this class will be a waste of your, and what is infinitely worse, my time ... However, here we are, so ... you may attend or not, you may complete your assignments at your whim ...". Two worlds which obviously are miles apart.

#### **Fame (by Alan Parker, USA 1980)**

In this sequence from *Fame*, the students of the High School of Performing Arts, who are attending a hard four-year course to learn how to dance, sing, act and play musical instruments, must face the English teacher, Prof. Sherwood, who is quick in showing her intolerance and lack of sensitivity to ethnic and socio-cultural issues. As she starts calling the roll, she scolds an African-American boy: "This is my home room, and you will speak as I like ...". Then she goes on in an authoritarian tone, "I don't care how you dance ... or how many colored tutus you have ... If you don't give your academic subjects equal time, you're out". Once again, the confrontation is open and hard, and student's motivation is stimulated through clear threats and by keeping one's own teaching out of tune with the contexts it belongs to.

#### **4. Time for violence**

Several movies in the '80s and '90s have gone much farther and offer a distressing and pessimistic view of American schools, which are often portrayed as prisons, where the only aim is to keep semi-

*delinquent students under control. Teachers have to deal with such students and often adopt their same methods, trying to ward off a level of violence which at times seems to turn into an urban warfare. Here the traditional educational-pedagogic categories no longer apply and the physical clash between school/teachers and students reaches the furthest limit - we are actually watching action - or even horror - movies.*

**Pump up the volume (by Allan Moyle, Usa-Canada 1990)**

*In this movie, an apparently quiet student starts running a pirate radio station, which every night invites students to face up to the problems they have at school and in their own lives (school problems, but also and first and foremost their future, (homo)sexuality, frustrations and aspirations), conveying what can be considered as "the '80s manifesto": "What's the point of spending one's youth in a decade so void that there is nothing to be expected and nobody worth of respect?" (Note 3). The crisis seems to have taken on an existential character, but the movie does not offer any easy way-out and no hope at all: the student's speeches give rise to a series of acts of violence which teachers do not know how to deal with ... At a certain point there appears a poster on the ground as people tread on it: "I got a right to education" - but it is merely a superficial slogan which is destined to fall on deaf ears.*

**Class of 1999 (by Mark L. Lester, USA 1990)**

*At this point, violence is going to take over: the teachers' purpose is mainly to try and defend themselves. We can see this in the sequence from Class of 1999, in which Prof. Hardin comes steadily into the classroom and, among his violent, unruly students starts spelling out his intentions: his history course will be difficult, there will be a test every fortnight, two hours' homework each night ... "I act following a model which includes a zero grade of tolerance ... No excuse will ever be accepted". As he says this, the students break out into a noisy fight. What additional means can a teacher adopt in such circumstances? Apparently there is nothing he can do, except adopting a corresponding degree of violence. The pedagogical relationship no longer exists: thanks to his physical strength, the teacher knocks two students out and order seems to be restored ...*

**Class of 1984 (by Mark L. Lester, USA 1982)**

*In the sequence from Class of 1984, a young music teacher is immediately advised to "turn a blind eye" to everything he sees, if he wants to survive in this school. At first the teacher tries to do his job, but violence explodes up to the point when, after students have annoyed him in various ways and have even raped his wife, he finally springs into action and kills them, one by one, in a sequence of savage acts of violence.*

*Movies like this have had several sequels: for example, [187](#) (by Kevin Reynolds, USA 1997), [The substitute](#) (by Robert Mandel, USA 1996), [Teaching Mrs Tingle](#) (by Kevin Williamson, USA 1999), which turn from black comedy to action movies, from horror to science fiction (Prof Hardin in Class of 1999 is in fact a robot, especially built to control students): there is no way we can discuss them in educational or pedagogical terms. Such movies, though, are witness to the fact that, in the last decades of last century, American society could see its deepest anxieties about the role of schools and teachers reflected in films and, beyond the temporary enjoyment provided by explosions of violence, could manifest its pessimism and its apocalyptic vision of the future.*

*"It seems evident that the audience, all of whom are students or former students, find pleasure in seeing the bad teacher ridiculed, scapegoated, and even killed on-screen by students who take up the fight that audience members either left off or never entered. The recollection of bad teachers (or*

parents or bosses) from their own lives who have exerted power over them at will is enough to align an audience with the student or group of students on-screen who are battling oppressive forces represented in the films by the bad teachers ... in these films, student efforts at resistance propel them past the front line much to the delight of the audience, but the larger conflict remains unresolved. Students, like the good teachers who join them, seldom accomplish much in the battle against the institutional hierarchies backing up the bad teachers" (Note 4)

## 5. What about the future? Between pessimism and ambiguous alternatives

### [Detachment \(by Tony Kaye, USA 2011\)](#)

In *Detachment*, Prof. Barthes is hired, as the principal says, since he has been described as "the best substitute among unemployed teachers", and is warned that his aim is to strictly follow the curriculum. He is assigned a class which, as in many other movies, is immediately described as made up of violent, demotivated students with lots of problems to face. As he introduces himself to the class, turning his gaze towards the camera, and thus towards us, the audience, he says, "They totally lack concentration, because they are bored. Asking them to pay attention to such subjects as classical literature is a lost battle if they don't believe that you ... have some important things to share with them". The teacher, who actually shares some personal unresolved issues with his class, tries to set his face against his students' demotivation, but he will soon be overwhelmed by their problems, and will just be able to share their feelings of anxiety, rage and frustration.

### [Detachment \(by Tony Kaye, USA 2011\)](#)

Despite his efforts, Prof. Barthes will eventually end up sharing his own torment with his students: "Walking down the hallway or here in class how many of you have ever felt the weight pressing down on you?", and, raising his hand, "I have" - and his students raise their hands in unison with him. Then, while he mentions *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe and starts reciting a passage, we see only some students in the classroom, then a series of images of the school: empty, abandoned hallways, rooms with everything upside down, a strong wind wiping everything away ... until we finally see the teacher standing in front of an empty, ravaged classroom. Very rarely has a Hollywood movie so explicitly shown the sense of decadence and despair which puts an end to an educational experience. There is no hope here, and the uneasiness and discomfort turn from the sociological to the existential.

### [Waiting for Superman \(by Davis Guggenheim, USA 2010\)](#)

Only the year before (2010), the documentary film *Waiting for Superman* had shown the inefficiency of the public educational system and had launched an unprecedented attack against teachers and their unions. The documentary, which was produced with the financial help of powerful public figures (among whom Bill Gates, who appears in this trailer), offered a series of categorical statements, like, "Every kid has a dream - But our schools are failing them - For the first time in America, this generation will be less literate than the one before it - A film about a system that has broken - the people trying to fix it - and the kids whose lives hang in the balance". This extremely provocative and disquieting film provided a solution to the problems of the public system: a clear project of privatization, control over teachers and de-legitimization of unions.

### [Won't back down \(by Daniel Barnz, USA 2012\)](#)

*And the consequences of such attitudes were soon apparent.*

*Won't back down is a peculiar testimony to an alternative that has been taking place in the USA in the past few years to face the problem of the (perceived) inefficiency of the public educational system. In this movie, the mother of a dyslexic child (who we see painfully trying to read a sentence on the blackboard, while her schoolmates make fun of her and the teacher is busy making phone calls) and an African-American teacher (herself the mother of a problematic child) decide to join their efforts to set up a school where the problems of their children can be seriously considered. The school system, as represented by the teachers and the principal, is seen as an obstacle, rather than a resource, to learning. But as we read in the trailer, "a system can fail ... but a parent can't".*

*The two mothers can take up the opportunity provided by a law ("Parent Trigger"), which was passed for the first time in California in 2010, allowing the parents sending their children to a school which can be considered "underperforming" to self-manage the school itself if at least 50% of the parents agree to do it. In this case the teaching and administrative staff is fired and the school is managed by a private organization, which must define the curriculum and the standards to be reached. Financing comes, in addition to the public system, from private donors (thus originating a business system which can be very productive), and the school is allowed to hire and fire teachers and to accept or refuse students - a very strong form of liberalism indeed.*

*The two mothers in the movie start their battle, which meets the fierce opposition of the school principals, the teachers, and above all the teachers' unions. We see the two mothers canvassing the area where they live, handing out leaflets, setting up meetings and demonstrations. The African-American teacher, during a meeting with her colleagues, asks them what stifled their motivation to teach, and the answers she (and the film) gets are clear: the responsibility falls upon the public system contracts and restrictions as well as the unions' actions. The two mothers will eventually reach their objective and will be able to open a school where their children can find the support they need.*

*This story very clearly represents a strong tendency in American society to privatize many public sectors, from the postal system to telecommunications, from education to elderly people's care. The relevant institutions, once freed from the "weight" of bureaucracy and unions, can be managed with the efficiency that is common in private companies. Not everything goes smoothly, though: many "charter schools" (as such privatized schools are called) often hire under-qualified teachers, who can be fired at any time, and display high staff turnover rates, since teachers must often work on long, stressing shifts.*

### [We the Parents \(by James Takata, USA 2013\)](#)

*In 2013, the documentary We the Parents showed the process through which parents, who had joined the Parent Revolution organization, for the first time availed themselves of the above-mentioned law to turn a public school in California into a privately-managed school.*

**End of Part 2**

## Notes

- (1) Hooks B. 1996. "Making movie magic", in *Reel to real: race, sex and class at the movies*. New York, Routledge.
- (2) Brown T. 2015. "Teachers on film" in Jubas K., Taber N., Brown T. (eds.), *Popular culture as pedagogy*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam and Boston.
- (3) Il Mereghetti. *Dizionario dei film*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano.
- (4) Dalton M.M. 2010. *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the movies*, Peter Lang, New York, p. 85.

**Want to know more?**

- \* From *Curriculum Studies*:
  - [The Hollywood Curriculum: who is the 'good' teacher?](#) by M.M.Dalton
- \* From *Larry Cuban on school reform and classroom practice*:
  - [Why are there so few films and TV programs that capture the daily life and work of teachers in and out of school](#)
- \* From the *nprEd website*:
  - [What The Movies Taught Us About Teaching](#) by B.Mondello
- \* From the *New York Times Magazine*, September 14, 2012:
  - [Not so hot for teacher](#) by Elizabeth Alsop
- \* [Teachers on film: Changing representations of teaching in popular cinema from Mr Chips to Jamie Firzpatrick](#) by Tony Brown

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