

Images of teachers in Hollywood cinema
(Part 3)

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1. Re-introduction

In [Part 2](#) of this Dossier we noted that during the second half of last century Hollywood cinema has provided a wide range of images of teachers. Traditional images, which date back at least to [Blackboard Jungle](#), "on the apparent level present the teacher as a super-hero –a brave free thinker with unstoppable energy mobilized for the good of his pupils. On an elusive level, however, such films send the teacher a frightening message, saying that if you are not a 'super-man,' you better accept the norms of school, because any change will include a lonely battle and potential personal risks. (Note 1).

In the following decades this image of the "good teacher", who is at the service of his students and the community as a whole, has been accompanied by alternative images of teachers who are ready to react, even in violent ways, to the same brutal violence which they have to endure in their daily work in the classroom; and also of teachers seen with irony or even sarcasm, like comic figures that with their odd or simply apathetic behaviours can inspire a smile (if not a laugh) mixed with pity.

Other movies have presented the image of a "tormented" teacher, afflicted by personal traumas which often reflect the problems and crises her/his students are facing. As we saw in [Detachment](#), these images of teachers, although passionately committed to their work and ready to act to change the dark fate of their classes, do not have sufficient energy to work out real changes, and thus end up, if not leaving their school, being victims to their own impotence.

In all cases, the negative representations of teachers are set against a background of a public opinion which is often unsatisfied, it not openly hostile, towards teachers seen as unproductive and unprepared figures, as well as towards a public educational system seen as bureaucratized, expensive and inefficient.

In the last part of this Dossier we shall continue the exploration of the images that Hollywood cinema has provided of the professional, as well as personal, life of teachers.

2. The one-dimensional teacher: the man/woman is his/her profession

[To Sir, with Love \(by James Clavell, GB 1967\)](#)

In this sequence from To Sir, with love, Prof. Thackery (Sidney Poitier), at the end of the school year, receives the grateful appreciation of his students, who give him a present and even sing a song just for him. Visibly embarrassed and moved by all this, the teacher does not seem to react to the clear erotic signals coming from the singing girl, who has long had a crush on him. Neither does he seem to notice the colleague, in the background, who has for months shown all her affection for him. Prof. Thackery identifies himself with his profession: as a man, he is fully and exclusively dedicated to his mission as an educator.

These figures of teachers shown as "missionaries", "saviours" of their students, ready to give up their own life for them, and endowed with special powers, are real "super-teachers", whose personal life we know little or nothing about. Such teachers are often single, or separated (as in [Educating Rita](#) (by Lewis Gilbert, GB 1983), where "a young London hairdresser (Julie Walters) asks an alcoholic professor (Michael Caine) to give her literature lessons, in exchange for "life" lessons" (Note 2), or widow(er)s (as in [Good Will Hunting](#) (by Gus Van Sant, USA 1997), where a rebellious orphan boy (Matt Damon) is recognised as a maths genius and "adopted" by a teacher (Stellan Skarsgard) and by a psychoanalyst (Robin Williams).

Such adult figures are usually not very reactive to emotional/erotic attractions. "The teacher is symbolically presented as a monk or a nun, consistent with the historical tradition of schools in Europe that were run by monasteries" (Note 1). In [Up the down staircase](#) (by Robert Mulligan, USA 1967) a young, fragile and may be even a little neurotical teacher has to face, as is often the case, a class made up of delinquent, drug-addicted students: she will find the strength to carry on with her job, but one of her students will misinterpret the pedagogical attention she is paying to him for something more - and this will set off a crisis in her ...

Among the teachers who "sublimate" all their aspirations in their profession, how not to mention Prof. Keating (Robin Williams) in [Dead Poets' Society](#) (by Peter Weir, USA 1989), Prof. Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer) in [Dangerous minds](#) (by John N. Smith, USA 1995) and Prof. Escalante (Edward James Olmos) in [Stand and deliver](#) (by Ramon Menendez, USA 1987)? In all these cases, the teacher sets up a special relationship with her/his students; she/he needs her/his students' admiration and love, as if at school, and only at school, they can find what life has denied them.

[The prime of Miss Jean Brodie \(by Ronald Neame, GB 1969\)](#)

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

Perhaps no other character as Miss Brodie has given us such a clear picture of a "missionary" and "vocationally inspired" teacher. Miss Brodie (Maggie Smith, in a role which won her an Academy Award), a teacher in an Edinburgh college of the '30s, is an eccentric, anticonformist figure who, thanks to her exceptional personality, exercises an extraordinary influence on her pupils ("my girls", as she calls them). In the trailer (Video 1) we hear her say, "I am in the business of putting

old heads on young shoulders, and all my pupils are the crème de la crème! Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life! You girls are my vocation! ... I am dedicated to you in my prime!". In her devotion to "goodness, truth and beauty", we see her taking her pupils to the opera, to museums, to picnics. And when the headmaster (Video 2) remarks that "We do not encourage the progressive attitudes", Miss Brodie retorts, "To me education is simply a leading out of what is already there". To the headmaster's observation that "I had hoped that there might also be a certain amount of putting in", she answers, "That would not be education but intrusion".

Conrack (by Martin Ritt, USA 1974)

Prof. Conroy (Jon Voigt) in Conrack, too, is a teacher whose private life we know nothing about. We see him ready to give all his love to his class of black children he tries to save from a future of poverty and ignorance. He does not just teach them the official "curriculum", but almost adopts them as his own children: he teaches them how to brush their teeth, recognize wild flowers while they recite poems, appreciate classical music and takes them for walks in order to show them the world ... All this will lead him to being fired.

3. Professional life spoils personal life

In some movies, the commitment required by the job is so heavy and/or the work contexts so problematic that the personal and affective life of the teacher can be seriously damaged. This is what happens to Prof. Dadier (Glen Ford) in Blackboard Jungle (by Richard Brooks, USA 1955), who gets a teaching appointment in an urban New York school, where he has to face hostile and violent students, who carry out a physical attack on him and a colleague of his in the street and even send anonymous letters to his wife, telling her that her husband has a lover at school. Much worse happens to Prof. Norris in Class of 1984 (by Mark L. Lester, USA 1981), whose students, who are a real gang of violent delinquents, go as far as raping his wife: but the times have changed, violence is now everywhere, and in this case the well-intentioned teacher will change into a ruthless murderer, killing his students one by one.

Other cases do not show physical violence, but the family life of the teacher has to endure a hard test as a consequence of the time and energy that she/he spends at school (presumably taking them away from his family). This is the case of Prof. Gruwell (Hilary Swank) in Freedom writers (by Richard LaGravenese, USA/Germany 2007), who, to make up for the lack of funds at her school and in order to organize trips for her students, decides to take up two additional jobs - which take up so much of her life that the exasperated husband will eventually divorce her. Almost as an ironical touch, Prof. Gruwell will get a promotion at the end of the school year ...

Mr. Holland's opus (by Stephen Herek, USA 1995)

We do not reach such extremes in Mr. Holland's opus, in which Prof. Holland, a music teacher whose main ambition is to write a symphony, is actually so busy with his school duties that he ends up neglecting his wife and, most of all, his deaf-dumb son. Faced by his wife's reproach, he gives voice to the contradiction of his position (teacher-cum-husband-cum-father), who cannot reconcile his different roles in life: "How the hell am I supposed to be everything to everybody?".

4. Professional life as a mere background

In a few movies teachers' professional life is used only as a background, while the movie's main

interest is in the description of their private life. In such cases, as we would expect, the aspects of the teacher's work are only hinted at, and only serve to stress the (usually problematic) aspects of their private life. This is the case in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (by Richard Brooks, USA 1977; the original version of the movie is visible [here](#)), in which a teacher in a school for deaf students (Diane Keaton), although totally committed to her work, is actually unsatisfied with her affective and sexual life, owing to, among other things, her strict Catholic education, and spends her nights touring night clubs, often meeting cynical or violent men. The movie thus provides a desperate and hopeless portrait of a woman (as well as of a society) for whom the sexual freedom of the '70s does not provide enough energy to fill her existential gaps.

In [This is my father](#) (by Paul Quinn, Ireland/Canada 1998) the history teacher Prof. Johnson's professional life is shown only in two sequences, one at the start and the other at the end of the movie. At the start, we see Prof. Johnson (James Caan) looking out of a window in his classroom while a student illustrates his research: it is clear that work is of no interest to Johnson. This is confirmed by another student, who openly tells him that they have no interest whatsoever in history and, additionally, that they think that he is not such a good teacher after all. Only at this point do we find out that Johnson is a widower, that he lives alone, and that he has to help his sister take care of their sick mother. Just by chance he finds an old picture of his parents, which will take him to Ireland, trying to discover the truth about their love story. Such discovery of his roots will have a cathartic effect on him: at the end of the movie, we see him back in his classroom, but this time he has found a new start in his career as a teacher and educator.

In other movies, too, teachers' professional life is just hinted at, usually as a dull and sad routine, from which they try to escape: in [Rachel, Rachel](#) (by Paul Newman, USA 1968), a thirty-five year old teacher (Joanne Woodward), tormented by a tyrant mother, thinks she can rescue herself by having an affair with a friend and through an assumed pregnancy: she will be bitterly disappointed, but at the end she will find the courage to leave her present life and start off a new one. A similar story is told in [Jackknife](#) (by David Jones, USA 1988): in this case, too, an unsatisfactory professional life serves as the background to the story of a biology teacher (Kathy Baker), who tries to find a meaning for her life through a tormented affective relationship.

In all such movies, the teacher's profession (and especially the woman teacher's profession, in the last couple of movies we mentioned) is seen as a makeshift, or as a wrong choice, or, again, as a dull and demotivating career, which does certainly not impact positively on the teacher's personal life.

5. Professional life permeates personal life (and vice-versa)

In some cases, however, it is precisely the school experience that seems to redeem a problematic personal life, as if life in the classroom had an almost "therapeutic effect" on private life. In [Goodbye, Mr. Chips!](#) (by Sam Wood, USA 1939), a shy, withdrawn teacher (Robert Donat, who was awarded an Academy Award for best actor), has reached the end of his career and thinks back to all his life as a committed teacher, for whom family life and work have practically coincided. The movie was remade as a musical ([Goodbye, Mr. Chips](#), by Herbert Ross, USA 1969) with Peter O'Toole playing the main character.

More recently, [The Professor](#) (by Wayne Roberts, USA 2018) tells the "teaching" transformation of

a young teacher (Johnny Depp) who, after finding out he has terminal cancer, re-discovers his "vocation" and his life in the classroom with his students. This equals to say that only a private dramatic event (and an extreme one at that) can bring new life into a profession which is normally far from stimulating and gratifying ...

6. What about sex?

We have already remarked how teachers' images at the movies are often lacking in psychological depth and show people whose affective and sexual life is absent, limited, or unknown. And yet the context where such people work are surely not exempt from an emotional and sexual charge which is often clearly shown: male students of "urban" high schools, coming from a deprived socio-cultural background, are particularly keen to show their interest, sometimes in rough ways, in their female teachers. In [Blackboard jungle](#) (by Richard Brooks, USA 1955), which we have already examined, one of the protagonist's colleagues shows a definite attraction to him (who is an absolutely faithful husband), but, as we can expect, she is also an object of sexual appeal to the schools' violent teenagers - a sexual tension which ends up in the students trying to rape her.

At the same time, a class of teenagers facing a (mostly female) teacher who strives to build a personal relationship with them and cares a lot for their well-being in the classroom, is charged with an emotional-sexual tension which becomes even stronger if the teacher takes on a "seductive" role (in the widest and most positive sense), using her "charisma" to transform her students, usually ill-disposed if not plainly hostile at the start. To set a boundary to the dangers of such "seduction", the teacher in these movies is often obliged to adopt some sort of "sublimation" process, thereby shifting the erotic interest towards more socially and culturally accepted targets - and, more specifically, towards students' love of the subject matter being taught.

[The mirror has two faces \(by Barbra Streisand, USA 1996\)](#)

In this sequence from [The mirror has two faces](#), the English literature teacher, Prof. Morgan (Barbra Streisand) is giving a lecture to a fascinated young audience. What is she talking about? Love, courtly love, as well as sex and the pleasures of falling in love and making sex. As she talks, we see a colleague of hers, maths teacher Prof. Larkin (Jeff Bridges) roaming about the room while carefully listening to the lecture. Later he will ask her: "How can you keep them in class?". The two teachers are actually extremes: she is seductive in class but passive outside, while he is a boring intellectual in class but sexually active outside. The movie's moral can be taken for granted: intellectual and sexual intensity can both inhabit a woman, as in the double-faced mirror in the original title. However, "in order for teaching and sexuality to be in their proper symmetry, Larkin must be as engaging in the classroom as he is in the bedroom; Morgan must be as enticing in the bedroom as she is compelling in the lecture hall" (Note 3)

Prof. Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer), too, in [Dangerous minds](#) (by John N. Smith, USA 1995), which we have mentioned several times, has problems of her own: she accepts the teaching job to earn a living after her recent divorce; and finds herself teaching in a "dangerous zone", i.e. to a class full of violence and moral chaos - but also full of hardly repressed erotic tensions. "She substitutes teaching as a re-expression (or is it repression?) of her unfulfilled sexual desires ... By channelling her sexual energy into erotic discipline, Johnson neutralizes the dangers - sex and violence - of the classroom and makes these students commit to her instruction ... Apparently, teaching English means teaching erotic displacement into poetry and literature classrooms" (Note 3)

Mr. Holland's Opus (by Stephen Herek, USA 1995)

The end of Mr. Holland's opus, too, which we mentioned to show this teacher's dramatic contradiction between his love for school and his devotion to his family, represents a triumph of the choice (or obligation?) to abandon erotic wishes, as well as artistic ones (he has tried to compose his own symphony throughout his life), in order to be able to commit himself to his students and his family. Holland had had a strong (repressed) sexual attraction for one of his students, and had also helped another student, surely lacking in sex-appeal, to persevere in the study of clarinet despite all her problems. In this sequence, which celebrates his retirement, it is just this latter student, as ambitious as lacking sexual connotations, now Governor of Arizona, to give one of the official talks - and she will also play the clarinet in the orchestra playing Holland's symphony, which he has eventually succeeded to compose, now playing it in front of the school. It is the triumph of a life which has given up desire for the sake of a whole-hearted commitment to the values of family and teaching.

However, we cannot end this Dossier by giving the impression that love and sex are banned from movies about teachers: a notable exception, for example, is [Children of a lesser God](#) (by Randa Haines, USA 1986), in which a teacher of deaf-dumb students (William Hurt) falls in love with a deaf school caretaker (Marlee Matlin) - although she is not a teenage student ... Just as in [Molly Maxwell](#) (by Sara St. Onge, Canada 2012; watch the original trailer [here](#), and the complete film with Italian subtitles [here](#)) a student falls in love with her photography teacher (which will cause problems for both), while in [A teacher](#) (by Hannah Fidel, USA 2013) it is the teacher who falls in love with one of his students ...

7. Conclusion

"A book cannot do what a film does ... Films can potentially carry ideas and information with more power .. and more effectively than the written word. Thus, some school films capture the daily life, the personal relationships, the lived encounters of classrooms, in ways our written histories do not. They reveal things that we ... cannot see (or choose not to see) or cannot see well, or see but not tell as well. [School films] provide encounters with teachers, parents, and adolescents and a thick description of ... schools that histories of education cannot even approximate" (Note 4)

Ferris Bueller's day off

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

Notes

- (1) Schwarz-Franco O. 2016. ["Teachers in film: Inspiration for Autonomous and Transformative teaching or a warning against it?"](#), *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 4(5), pp. 994-1002.
- (2) *Il Mereghetti. Dizionario dei film*, Baldini Castoldi Dalai, Milano.
- (3) Bauer D.M. 1998. ["Indecent proposals: Teachers in the movies"](#), *College English*, Vol. 60, No. 3, pp. 301-317.
- (4) Trier J.D. 2001. ["The cinematic representation of the personal and professional lives of teachers"](#), *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Summer, pp. 127-142.



Want to know more?

- * [Hollywood films about school: Where race, politics and education intersect](#) by Ronald E. Chennault
- * [Schooling in the light of popular culture](#) by P.Farber, E.F.Provenzo and G. Holm
- * *From the M/C Journal, vol. 19, n. 2, 2016:*
 - [The portrayal of the teacher as mentor in popular films: Inspirational, supportive or life-changing?](#) by Angelina Ambrosetti
- * *From the Australian Review of Public Affairs, September 2008:*
 - [How real is reel? Teachers on screen and in the classroom](#) by Leslie Scanlon
- * *From the European Journal of Contemporary Education, 2018, vol.7, no. 2, pp 291-331*
 - [Professional Risk: Sex, Lies, and Violence in the Films about Teachers](#) by Fedorov A., Levitskaya A., Gorbatkova O., Mikhaleva G.

