

School at the movies: teaching and educational relationships (Part 1)

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1. Introduction: a few basic choices

We are going to start exploring how movies reflect life at school or in a classroom with an important preliminary remark: we believe that today any school wishing to play its educational role in an efficient way should be based on an idea of learning not as one-sided transmission of contents from an "omniscient" teacher to students passively accepting her/his knowledge, but rather as shared construction of knowledge and competences, where teacher and students cooperate, each within the scope of their respective roles and statuses, with the primary object of developing learners' autonomy, at school and throughout life.

The first important consequence of this preliminary remark is the need for a class climate in which interpersonal relationships, between teacher and students as well as among students themselves, are positive and productive. The educational relationship between teacher and class is not just aimed at promoting a general sense of "well-being", but also at ensuring the effectiveness of teacher's strategies - those strategies that try to promote, through disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and transversal learning, students' growth in autonomy. Teaching and educational relationships are often seen as important yet isolated factors - and the proof is that teacher training in Italy is almost always organized along two rarely converging lines: on the one hand, teaching practices (managed by subject teacher trainers) and on the other hand, educational relationships (managed by pedagogical advisors). In this way the close interdependence between the two processes is lost: efficient teaching implies positive interpersonal relationships, but educational relationships are not an end in themselves, but, within school as an institutional context, are also (and mostly) aimed at students' learning, through the teacher's strategies.

School can obviously be organized along educational models very different from (if not opposed to) the one which we have just outlined: a purely transmissive way of teaching (basically provided by the "teacher explanation + students' tests" model) can in theory neglect if not dismiss interpersonal relationships. The two models, which we can broadly label as "transmissive" vs "constructivist", are just the two opposite ends of a continuum, with many possible intermediate positions.

Within this perspective, we can summarise (by reference to Mariani 2010: 191-194) the bases of a positive and productive class climate by referring to:

- *shared responsibility and involvement: the teacher's democratic and authoritative leadership (thus neither authoritarian nor permissive) ensures the balance between two students' crucial needs: control and structure, on the one end, and personal autonomy, on the other;*
- *self-awareness: the learning context is enhanced by the awareness, both by the teacher and by the students, of the meaning of what they are currently engaged in;*
- *sharing of behaviour rules, principles of interpersonal relationships, specific procedures of class activities;*
- *monitoring and self-evaluation: self-regulation implies transparency both of teaching/learning processes and of expected outcomes, as well of clear and shared evaluation criteria;*
- *cooperation: students' cooperative work gives rise to explicit group objectives, promotes interdependence and improves cohesion and solidarity;*
- *communication: this is the most general principle, underlying all the previous ones. Authentic communication is based on active and empathic listening, on the expression and acceptance of both positive and negative emotions, on the coherence between words and behaviours, and on the genuine respect for people (both teachers and students) as unique individuals.*

A class climate based on such a rich and demanding range of factors cannot be improvised, but is the result of patient, day-by-day commitment, where teacher and students work, although within personal and contextual constraints, to build together learning routes. By analysing film sequences we will discover that sometimes even one of the factors listed above can make the difference, since it can activate changes and possibilities of personal and collective development.

2. School at the movies

Countless movies have chosen school as a context throughout the century-long life of cinema. Very often, school represents only one of the spatial and temporal dimensions in which the story told by the movie is set, with characters happening to be teachers and/or students (as well as headmasters, other school staff or parents ...), whose actions may take place primarily out of the school premises. Films on childhood or adolescence, for example, often (although not always) include at least a few sequences set at school (since children and adolescent spend quite a lot of time there) - however, the school context works only as one of the sets of the film's events, and often not the most important one for the plot's development (see on this, e.g. Tomasi e Quaglia 2003, Cortellazzo e Quaglia 2007, Frasca 2010).

To our ends, we are interested in those movies, or, more often, those movie sequences, set in a classroom, where we can clearly see the unfolding of those factors of class climate which are the object of our Dossier - or, in other words, where we can more specifically focus on the link between teaching and educational relationships. By so doing, the number of movies which are relevant to our purposes will be drastically reduced, although, as we shall see, sometimes even a short sequence, if carefully analysed, can throw new light on several important issues. To this end, we will focus closely on the teachers' verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

3. Prologue: [Amarcord](#) (by Federico Fellini, Italy-France 1973)

Let's start on a light note: school in Italy at the end of the '30s of last century, as recalled by Fellini

with irony and a hint of melancholy. The director's aim is certainly not to criticize this context but to recall it with humour and affection; yet, this school, so apparently far away in time, filled with teachers (and students) who are not much more than grotesque caricatures, can provide us with a real vision (although seen through the lens of filmic re-construction) of a system and a whole world. This is the traditional, authoritarian, transmissive kind of school which would continue to exist in Italy for a long time (not to mention its persistence in today's world ...): teachers who are wholly focused on themselves and the "explanation" (and even "recitation"!) of their subject matter and on its mere mechanical transmission, totally indifferent to and unconcerned with their students' comical (yet revealing) reactions - students who are often taken up by other things (sleeping, playing jokes, making fun of their teachers both behind and in front of them). And a non-existent pedagogical relationship: two worlds apart, an immeasurable gap between teachers and learners.

4. [The 400 blows](#) (by François Truffaut, France 1959)

This sequence, too, takes us to a school context not so different from the one recalled in *Amarcord*, though in a different place and at a different time (France in the '50s), and with a different filmic treatment (no irony or caricatures here, but harsh reality). The teacher is dictating a poem, which he is also writing on the blackboard, and we witness a boy desperately (and funnily!) trying to cope with his task, with the class, unseen by the teacher, mimicking the words of the poem. When a whistle is heard, the teacher turns angrily towards the class: "What idiot whistled? I'm warning you. If no one confesses, you'll all be sorry. Right, Simonet?". Simonet replies, "I didn't do it, Sir. It wasn't me, Sir" and the teacher: "Cowards too! What a class this year! ..." and then, addressing Antoine who was supposed to clean another blackboard, "Your parents will hear from me ... Poor France! What a future!". Again, two worlds (teacher and students) who are simply not communicating, with students addressed with anger and sarcasm. (Note that the Italian version offers a different, and even more illuminating, sequence).

5. [Song for a raggy boy](#) (by Aisling Walsch, Ireland-Great Britain-Danemark-Spain 2003)

Note: The YouTube video consists of the whole film. Please follow the times given in brackets to refer to the sequences under consideration.

This movie is set in 1939 in an Irish Catholic reform school for boys (a strongly authoritarian institution, which was abolished only in the '80s). We watch Professor Franklin, who is just back from fighting in the Spanish civil war on the democrats' side, arriving at the school (5:27), greeted as "the first lay teacher employed here ... and God only knows how much we need a change ...". Franklin actually will find himself in a sort of prison, where sadism, cruelty, hypocrisy and paedophilia are the daily reality, and where the slightest hint of change or deviation from the rigid rules is severely punished.

On his first day in class (08:45), Franklin finds the "prefect", who, with sarcasm and diffidence, gives him some pieces of advice: "The creatures you are going to teach ... are not to be confused with intelligent human beings ... The only thing that they understand is strength ... should you fail to employ that strength, they'll eat you alive". Franklin replies, "Thank you for the advice, but I think I'll be able to manage". Then, as the boys enter the classroom, he introduces himself: "We'll begin at the beginning. My name is Mr Franklin. As you know, this is my first day at St. Jude's - and I don't intend it to be my last ... so if any of you wants to challenge me, I suggest to do it now". Then:

"I'm a fair man, but don't be under any illusions ... I've got eyes in the back of my head", as he snatches a sheet of paper from a boy's hands - which causes the whole class to laugh. Since his first remarks, we understand that Franklin wishes to establish, as the first step, an open relationship with the students, based on mutual respect and a clear recognition of each other's role: "Any questions?" A student raises his hand, introducing himself as "458 Peters" - at this school, boys are identified with numbers and not with their names - but Franklin answers, "Stand up, Mr Peters". The student asks, "What's one like you doing in a place like this?" and Franklin replies with a question: "Why do you think I'm here?", and another student, chuckling, "You couldn't get a job anywhere else". "Have you got any serious questions?". A student, in a serious, determined tone, reminds Franklin that he hasn't answered the first question, and he gets the answer, "I'm here because I'm a teacher, and I think I'm a good one". This first exchange shows that students have immediately realised that they can ask questions and get answers - a preliminary, basic form of democratic participation.

Franklin then proceeds to set some clear rules for the class: first, "You will call each other by name"; second, "The reasons for being here are no concern of mine; my only concern is that while you are in this room, that you learn something"; third, "You can ask any question you like - I will try and answer it - if I can't, I'll say so". The impact of these "shared rules" between teacher and students works as a sort of "agreement" on which class interaction will be based.

Franklin then asks Peters to read aloud from a book, and when the class bursts out laughing, he discovers that Peters can't read. He wonders why this may be possible, and another boy answers him in an almost reproachful tone, "Because no one ever taught him. That's why": Then, prompted by the teacher, he says he can read - and write, too - and then Franklin says, "Then I suggest you teach Peters", and the boy answers, "Why should I?". "That's a good question. Now sit down and think about it ... So anyone else can read and write? Raise your hands, don't be ashamed". During a very short interaction with the class, Franklin has already made his attitude very clear: faced with the question, "Why should I?", which implies the lack of a sense of cooperation and solidarity, and therefore, individualism as the key value at this school, Franklin doesn't look surprised and accepts the challenge: "Think about it ...". In other words, Franklin does not expect the impossible from his class, but starts from their actual present situation and bases his teaching on this recognition.

The following sequences show, on the one hand, the rigid rules being enforced in the school, and, on the other hand, Franklin starting "from zero", and entrusting those who can read and write with the task of helping him, while he helps individual students with their particular problems. However, when two students start fighting, he doesn't hesitate to send the culprit to the (sadistic) prefect. As he had stated at the start, students should be under no illusions: rules will be enforced - as per the "agreement" which was shared with the class. When the student comes back, badly wounded in the head, the result of the prefect's harsh punishment, Franklin has the first of a series of violent confrontations with the prefect on the "educational methods" enforced at the school.

Later in the film, we will see Franklin and his students, on Christmas Eve, enjoying themselves: their relationship, based on respect and trust, is firmly established by now. The film will show further sequences of great tension at the school, but eventually Professor Franklin, at first tempted to leave the school, will decide to remain and continue his battle.

6. [The class](#) (by Laurent Cantet, France 2008)

*We are now in the new millennium, in a middle school of a suburban district in Paris. Students are "in the fourth grade" (the last year of the French middle school), with a high rate of immigrants and in an area of severe social deprivation. Professor Bégaudeau (playing himself, and also the author of the book on which the movie is based) faces the harsh reality of a pluriethnic and multicultural class, where different languages and cultures mix and social and economic inequalities are bound to get stronger. The language used in class is the most evident symbol of this difficult, if not impossible, integration. (The film's original title, *Entre les murs*, points to a school "made of walls", which tends to segregate and divide rather than to integrate and unite.)*

The teacher is well aware of this situation and, faced with an unruly class, where violence, indifference, lack of interest and demotivation are the staple of class life, accepts the great challenge of teaching the language as the first step towards cultural growth; and he does so with a passion and, sometimes, with a sort of improvisation which, if on one side seems to show the lack of a clear and well-mastered methodology, on the other side appears as the desperate attempt to hook up with an ill-disposed, unwilling audience.

The movie does not aim to provide definite answers to the challenges of a multicultural class, but shows, in an honest and sincere way, how teaching strategies, especially in difficult situations, can hardly produce results if not acted out within an educational relationship which sets the basis for a cooperative dialogue between teacher and students. (Note that the Italian version offers a different, very intriguing sequence).

7. [To be and to have](#) (by Nicolas Philibert, France 2002) – (Full film)

We are still in France, but this time in a small mountain village, at a very small school - actually, a single room hosting 13 children aged between 3 and 11, attending different grade levels and taught by a single teacher. The director filmed 60 hours of actual lessons, within a period of six months and three seasons, with the real students and teacher, thus recreating, through a documentary approach, a sort of children's microcosm, with a tone which is neither pedagogical nor ideological, but rather aims at showing how the passion for learning and communicating admirably merge with all the emotions of real life in a real classroom, mixing gentleness and firmness, joy and sorrow.

In such a multi-grade class groupwork is unavoidable, so that students can be grouped according to their level, i.e. the "grade class" they're attending. The teacher is rarely on screen, but we can constantly hear his voice talking to the students, moving from one table to the next, from a grade level to the next. At the same time, he keeps an eye of what everybody is doing, providing support and gratification, but also stimulating, prompting and reproaching - in a word, using all the range of teaching strategies (but also of interpersonal relationships) that are necessary, step by step, as class activities "flow".

He gives advice and provides examples, but is also ready to make students aware of what they have (not) done, how they've done it, and what still needs to be done. When he is asked a question, he is also very careful to elicit an answer from his students before giving his own: when Jojo asks him if it's morning or afternoon (01:45), he says, "Before the afternoon, what do we do? We ... ",

prompting the boy to say "Eat" - "Have you eaten yet?" "No" "No, so it's ..." "Morning". Notice that instead of using the "normal" question/answer pattern, the teacher starts a sentence and lets the students complete it, thus making them active agents in the formulation of an answer.

The teacher goes on to evaluate the work done by his pupils (02:23). However, rather than simply giving a grade or his personal judgment, he shows each pupil's work to the others, prompting them to give an opinion on how well each work has been done, thus promoting what we can call "self-evaluation", on the one hand, and "co-evaluation" (evaluation between peers), on the other hand. This implies not just a cooperative approach, but also the gradual development of a personal critical approach, even at this very early age.

The small size of the class allows the teacher to provide individual support (04:12) to a boy just learning to read. Notice that even this "reading session" is enlivened by the teacher asking the boy questions, prompting him to give definitions for "difficult words", and making the text a little more relevant to the boy's personal life. When the boy reads "nightmare", the teachers starts a short conversation on the boy's experience with nightmares ... always checking that the other pupils don't interrupt the child and let him speak.

On the whole, we witness a constant dialogue going on between the teacher and his pupils - a dialogue based on authentic communication, on mutual respect, and on "rules" being adhered to not as mere abstract principles but as a sign of being in a community where everybody is responsible for the work being carried out and the way it can proceed smoothly. (Note that the Italian version offers a different, very interesting sequence).

8. Half Nelson (by Ryan Fleck, USA 2006)

The history teacher Dan Dunne enters the classroom and immediately starts to establish an informal relationship with his students: he uses irony, makes a few witty remarks, moves a desk and stands in front of the teacher's desk. Then he starts with a simple yet complex question, "What is history?" (this is also written on the board, together with another word, "opposites", which is clearly meant to provide an example and/or a possible answer, which is also a form of support). This basic question has actually a motivational role, i.e. is a preliminary step towards the other basic question, "Why do we/should we study history?". In this way, either consciously or unconsciously, the teacher tackles the crucial problem of constructing knowledge by starting from the images (beliefs, mental representations) that the students have about history.

Following a suggestion from a girl, he then provides a few examples of "opposites" (the word written on the board) and elicits other examples from the class. Soon a boy makes a witty remark which calls into question the sister of a classmate, Gina (thus making the class burst out laughing) - but Dan, rather than reproaching the student or simply ignoring him, follows this line of dialogue and prompts Gina, an African-American girl, to answer her classmate. Gina simply answers with a date (May 17th, 1954). It is clear that Dan wishes communication to flow uninterrupted, even if this implies a temporary digression from the main topic under discussion. Dan writes the date on the board and uses this interruption to make a further demand on his students: "I don't want just dates and facts, I wanna know why, I wanna know consequences, I wanna know what it means", thus introducing the methodology that teacher and students will follow.*

In the following sequence, Dan re-establishes the friendly classroom atmosphere: "I feel good today. Does anyone else feel good?", then goes on to give a concrete example of the concept of "opposite forces", asking for a volunteer to "arm wrestle" with him. As they wrestle, he explains the symbolic meaning of this game ("What we've got here is two opposing forces, pushing against each other ... as long as one is stronger ... but as the other one becomes stronger ...?). Then he proceeds with a more formal explanation, which is however based on the demonstration which has just taken place: "Now, turning points can happen like that, they can be physical, or they can happen on a wider scale - (at this point, Dan realizes that the headteacher has come into the classroom and is watching him, which leads him to interrupt the lesson) - like a war, or something, so ... won't you do me a favor, and write three examples of turning points that we talked about in class? OK?".

By using concrete experience, Dan starts once again "from the students' standpoint", but it is clear that he means to convey a key concept, in the light of which students can give meaning, as he had said, to the "dates" and "facts".

* May 17, 1954 is a crucial date for African-Americans' fight for civil rights: the Supreme Court of the USA published a memorable sentence which declared public school segregation unconstitutional.

End of Part 1. [Go to Part 2](#)

References

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- * From IMDb - International Movie Database:
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- * From <https://en.wikipedia.org>:
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