

## Thinking beyond content in film-pedagogy

### Abstract

Approaches to film education often rely heavily on the film content to determine the validity of classroom materials. This paper will extend the number of variables to be taken into consideration in any given teaching situation, if film is to meet with a receptive audience. These factors are: the context in which the content is being presented; the community among which the content is to discover relevance; the opportunities for expression and criticism available to the audience. Without sufficient attention to these contingencies, film-pedagogy risks being formulaic and outcome-driven.

Keywords: context; community; criticism

### Introduction: challenging the notion of content as curriculum

It is customary to think of film's educational value in terms of its educational content, whether that be visual, moral or epistemological. This is unsurprising: teachers are often inclined to think of film as a contribution to the curriculum, and thus subservient to the topic or task in hand. I don't want to take issue with a content-oriented film curriculum here, but rather suggest that the idea of film education can be enriched by paying attention to factors beyond the content of the frame. In my own work as a university lecturer on an Education Studies programme, I am increasingly conscious of other factors at play in the teaching and learning situation when using film in the classroom or lecture theatre, which require attention above and beyond plot, character and narrative. My argument here will firstly be that if we treat film solely as content, then we can only go so far as to say that films can show us all sorts of things, but they cannot guarantee any kind of learning as a consequence of that showing. Of course, there can be no such guarantee of success ever, but I want to suggest that a greater attention to the conditions in which we learn can facilitate better results than relying simply on the content of films to do the teaching for us. My aim here will therefore be to discuss three separate aspects to the film-viewing experience, a greater attention which offers the possibility for deepening its pedagogical potential: context, community, and criticism.

My discussion will be informed primarily by the Higher Education context in which I work, though I hope that much of what I have to say is applicable to primary and secondary education also. As a teacher of Education Studies, my initial starting point has been to ask what film can

tell/show us about education that texts and classroom observations cannot. I am now beginning to think about how some of those ideas might translate to other areas of curricular interest, whilst preserving the primacy of film instead of looking at it as illustrative text. The place that I ended up was to see film as providing the best examples of educational realities, the reality of education on screen. This paper does not confine itself to the discussion of the representation of education on screen, but instead tries to show that film's educational qualities rest with factors beyond what is represented.

## Context

To fully understand the significance of contextual considerations in relation to film education, it might help to begin with an anecdote. Whilst working as an English teacher at a school in Versailles, just outside of Paris, I went one weekend to the cinema to see Abdellatif Kechiche's *Couscous* (or *La Graine et Le Moulet* in French). The film was long, but after nearly two and a half hours, at the final credits everyone in the audience stood up and clapped. My own English customs had not prepared me for this experience, but I quickly joined in – not only because I had also enjoyed the film immensely, but I was glad to part of this communal appreciation for a screened performance. There were no actors present to applaud, but the audience itself was sharing an acknowledgment of something meaningful. But why? And why was this meaningful?

It is all too easy to pay close attention to the context in which the film's plot itself is taking place (its location) and be distracted from the context of its viewing. The former plays a significant role in our *experience* of a film: it is essential in transporting viewers and communicating a sense of place, whether that be a familiar or alien environment. But, I would argue, experience of a film doesn't immediately translate into education – there have to be other aspects at play for us to call the film-viewing experience *educational*, as opposed to, say, entertainment. To learn from a film is to believe you have acquired something different to mere experience. And one of the reasons we might hold that belief, comes down to the context of the film-viewing, the precise set of circumstances in which that viewing takes place.

In the comfort of your own home, watching Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* might constitute an enjoyable Saturday evening's viewing for fans of psychological thrillers; in the film studies classroom, however, it becomes a masterclass in cinematic technique. Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* might have a very different effect on the cinemagoer than it would on a history class for American high school kids. These contextual differences have a lot to say about education, because they are informed by choice, intention and will. The difference between the cinemagoer and the American high school kid is significant, not least because the former has chosen the content of their viewing (whether they want to learn something from the experience or not), whereas the high school kid is only aware that someone else (i.e. the teacher) wants for them to learn something. From the perspective of the American educational philosopher John Dewey, the degree to which we might describe the qualitative differences in film experience as educational depends on the extent to which the experience of the individual coincides with aims and expectations of society. The history class watching *12 Years a Slave* is participating in a particular set of expectations in relation to a curriculum, whereas the independent cinemagoer can only set expectations of herself.

Qualitative disparities between the film's location and viewing locus have drawn the attention of other film pedagogues – in the English language version of Alain Bergala's *Cinema Hypothesis* (2016), Alejandro Bachmann interviews the author about the difficulties not only of getting children to engage with films from cultures that seem alien to them, but also of screening films in cultures in which appreciation of the medium does not extend to its being understood as an artform. The view that Bergala expresses is close to the idea of cinema as a universal language, whose appeal stretches over national and cultural boundaries; at the same time, he recognises that schools take particular attitudes towards the place of film in the curriculum, and that for the most part these “tend to normalise, to homogenise, and thus reduce the singularity of the works as well as the individual reactions towards them” (Bergala, 2016: 120). Context, here, becomes important, if only to highlight the educational harm rather than good that institutional approaches to film-pedagogy might inflict.

Elsewhere, Bachmann and Manuel Zahn have drawn attention to the contextual dimensions of *film-theorising*, but without placing the same emphasis on *film-viewing*. In doing so, however,

Zahn and Bachmann remind us that film-viewing (and therefore film-pedagogy also) can itself be influenced by a cultural relationship with film informed by the theorising that is prevalent within that domain of culture. Referencing Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge," Zahn and Bachmann remind us that "every form of film education is embedded in, and thus influenced by, its regional context, which both limits and facilitates its specific implementation". For Walter Benjamin, the great danger presented by the film industry in general was that its works (as products) were abstracted entirely from the site of their creation, and that they would encourage a viewer to think abstractly – as opposed to culturally – in turn:

the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.

(Benjamin, 1999: 221)

Arguably, Benjamin's concern here is directed less towards an awareness of context, than cultural decline in general. But what he shares with Zahn and Bachmann is a recognition that film-theorising must call us back to the specific techniques involved in the film-making process, if the film education curriculum is not to drift towards more abstract formulae and content-driven approaches.

Whilst differences in national and regional context, both in terms of film and intellectual culture, are significant, the contextual considerations I want to take into account here are of a more subtle nature, and probably quite obvious. As Bergala himself recognises (and Cavell has

also lamented), film-viewing is certainly not any longer the same as cinema-going: not only are people more likely to consume media in home environments, but the providers of film will take the fact of this change into account when making films for this audience. The gradual shift away from cinema-going has only been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have driven all sorts of audiences to rediscover movies under lockdown circumstances, but may not be aware of how much those circumstances condition their viewing.

The physically embodied nature of film-viewing is also important here. Film-theorist Vivien Sobchack has written that “without an act of viewing and a subject who knows itself reflexively as the locus and origin of viewing as an act” (Sobchack, 1992: 51), there can be no such thing as the experience of film. This statement serves well enough for an experience that might be called subjective, but it won’t suffice if there is an educational qualifier attached to that experience. Education, as John Dewey argued, has to constitute a relation to others and to other things, to have a social dimension that is not simply concerned with one’s own seeing and being, but that of others also. An experience of film can only be called educational, then, if its act of viewing occurs for a reflexive subject who understands their viewing as an educational act, i.e. one that is historical, contextual, and relational. It is to the relational aspect that I now want to turn.

## **Community**

An understanding of context recalls the viewer to their embodied condition: the fact that we are reminded that film-viewing takes place in a certain time and place, is also a reminder of the fact that it is a bodily and not just a mental experience. As Anne Rutherford has written, “Cinema is not only about telling a story; it’s about creating an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of the spectator” (Rutherford, 2003: np). Given this embodied awareness, it is therefore significant to think about differences between film-viewing in isolation and film-viewing as part of a group. When we watch films on our own, we may be aware of changes in our own bodily response, such as heart rate, breathing, even tears. But when we watch films with one person or more, we might also be conscious of their presence

within the shared space, whether we know them or not. This awareness can be more pronounced when the screened image creates situations of discomfort – physical intimacy on film, for example, can generate laughter or embarrassment if the audience is a family or classroom.

The best films are often those that most unite viewers in their emotional and physical reaction to the viewing experience, whether in joy or sorrow. But even if viewers have experienced different reactions, they can still be united by the *fact* of having seen a film: they have become a community. To come back to my example of *Couscous*, I take it that the standing ovation for Kechiche's film was an expression of community, the reminder that we all bore witness to the same event. The force of this expression was particularly impressive given that the film itself deals with social and ethnic divisions in France, whilst its audience was very much of a kind: white, bourgeois, cultivated. The cynical view is that this expression of community can simply be attributed to an affectation of taste; the more optimistic view is that Kechiche's film spoke to things that individual members of an audience might have in common.

If Cavell complained that cinema-going was not the experience it was in his youth, we have to concede that the Cinema Paradiso model of youthful enchantment is simply not going to be replicated for young people attending a cinema today: they have too much choice to be falling in love with the same movies as the rest of the audience. Here we can also be despairing: of course school-age children are increasingly going to prefer to watch films in their own time via channels that directly appeal to their own interests, as opposed to discovering the intrinsic merits to film and film-watching as part of a group. But films do still have the potential to *stage* and to establish community. And the classroom is a particularly good place in which to carry this out, not least because it is one of the few places in which young people continue to find themselves gathered despite their very disparate interests and identities. It is harder, for instance, to cultivate community if you simply instruct students to watch a film in their own time – the sense of togetherness is simply missing.

In the classroom, film can have the effect of establishing a community of individuals who previously had very little in common other than the film itself, within a couple of hours. This

phenomenon has received fairly little attention in the film-education literature, but it is actually essential to the critical evaluation of our concepts. Concepts themselves depend on community (language games within forms of life) for their meaningfulness (irrespective of the political system in place), but they are also best tested in the company of others. The difference between film-viewing as a classroom-based, pedagogical activity and, say, reading in preparation for a class is that viewing takes place amongst others. Film's unity of sound and the visual marks its expression of public interest, the idea that the camera can't possibly be addressing itself to you, leaving you in private conversation with yourself. The intervention of the camera is one that marks its address as a public one, the concepts that it articulates as publicly contestable.

The difficulty of film-viewing arises from the suspicions we feel as regards other minds: there is not only the mind of the person that created the film, the minds of the actors on the screen, but also the many minds of others occupying the same physical space as you. Did they see what you saw? Did they feel what you felt? The only way to break this boundary is through speech.

## **Criticism**

At the end of a film, whether we are in a cinema or not, we are still somewhat still in the dark. We do not yet know whether others have had or shared a similar experience to the one we had. Did they think the film was good or not. The opportunity for learning lies in coming out of this darkness, by expressing what it is that we (think) we have seen. We call this kind of expression *criticism*. Criticism puts into motion the *verbal* nature of the *visual* experience of film-viewing, attempting to overcome something of the discomfort that the embodied encounter with film has induced in us. Without criticism, there can be no community: criticism holds within it the potential for rediscovering those things we have in common. This is where criticism is also distinct from critique: the former seeks to do justice to one's experience of a thing, the latter seeks to determine a thing's validity.

Even if we try to create the right conditions for learning, there is very little that can evidence the effect that a visual medium has had on children, besides from what they subsequently put

into words as part of their response. The exercise of putting film-viewing into words, then, becomes an essential part of what makes film educational, as opposed to just experience or entertainment. Criticism is a matter of getting children and young people to exercise their own judgment, to express what they thought of the films they have seen, and to begin to identify the ways in which the medium creates and crafts specific effects. By extension – and as a key part of engaging with the idea of community - criticism asks what we are prepared to accept as part of living together: it is part of our commitment to the social contract, the making public of our private reason. As the educationalist Elliot Eisner puts it:

Connoisseurship is private, but criticism is public. Connoisseurs simply need to appreciate what they encounter. Critics, however, must render these qualities vivid by the artful use of critical disclosure.

Criticism, then, isn't just a supplement to either the film-viewing or educational process: it is the glue that binds them, allowing the viewer to make sense of their experience amongst fellow viewers. From this point of view, the task of description and connection is better thought of as a conversation concerning the nature of the good, as regards the things that we, the community, care about. If we are to find out why and when we take education to be a good thing, something worth caring about enough to go on with it, we will have to talk about it. At the same time, criticism is not about "getting it right": there aren't really right or wrong answers when it comes to one's perception, but there are better and more coherent ways of expressing it. Criticism is about learning how to express oneself effectively as much as it is about being objective. As Cavell puts it in his essay 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', "The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it" (Cavell, 2017: 87). We have to learn how to confront our own experience of things in words.

Criticism, however, can only come about if we care enough about the films we watch in order to talk about them (and if we only watch them in isolation, there is a greater risk of that care fading). Cavell writes of art objects that they don't merely "interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but are concerned with them, and care about them; we



treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve for other people” (Cavell, 1969: 183). Cavell’s observation applies to people with all kinds of interest: the football fan is not simply knowledgeable about football, but is knowledgeable because s/he cares, because s/he invests football with a particular value. In my own teaching, I aim to show students how and why education is something we might care about, enough for us to go on doing it.

In my classes, and using film, I want to communicate to students that education is not just something about which it is good to care, but about which students are allowed to show why *they* care (if at all). In the case of education, I would argue that this begins with our concepts; there is something about the things we talk about in education that has brought us there because we are concerned, prompted to act. Students at other levels may find it valuable to discover (and rediscover) the issues most at stake in their classrooms through films which show those issues to be worth caring about.

So what does criticism look like? Let me explain by means of an example – which is to say, it is only in stating our case as to the experience of a film, and where we stand in relation to it, that we put into words what we might have learned, to discover whether that can make sense for others, and to listen to others’ do the same. Only through these motions does the impact of film-viewing become felt as educational. I will use an example from Kechiche’s film, as I have taken the trouble to refer back to it throughout this discussion.

In Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Couscous*, one scene lingers much longer in the memory than any other as one that gathered everything that was difficult and complicated about the film into one moment. The climactic scene of Rym’s bellydance, as the family awaits the arrival of the all-important couscous, is so multi-perspectival that any one interpretation will never suffice, and would in fact constitute an injustice of the kind that Kechiche seems always to be both criticising and avoiding in his films, i.e. that of picking up on one point and running with it. Life is always both too brutal and too beautiful for these reductionisms, and whilst it would be nice to see him find something of that ambiguity outside of the female figure, for now it would seem that at least the strangeness of his women, as well as their familiarity, fulfils the project of

allowing them to escape anything of the monolithic in his aesthetic gaze. The most generous of directors must still be those who concede that their subject sits always just a little outside of their comprehension.

In the scene, eyes are everywhere, and everywhere they say something different. The diners' eyes all fall upon a young lady of immigrant descent, summoning up a flavour of the exotic for their entertainment. The members of the audience are all there as paying customers, and therefore the situation is as much part of the transactional nature of their relations as it is a diversion from the delay. The men clearly feel a mixture of discomfort and excitement; the women a mixture of discomfort, envy, and possibly also excitement (initially the men whistle and the women titter as a means of defusing the obvious tension). It is unnecessary to use the word objectification here, because the viewer knows very well that the varying degrees of erotic and exotic fascination will well be different for each of the diners, despite their attention all being drawn into the same spot. As viewer, however, the privilege is to see the situation not only from this angle. Rym stares back over her audience, rarely meeting their eyes, with her own unique blend of emotions entangled in her gaze: defiance, contempt, ambition, power, and perhaps not a little desire also. With so many flashes of expression, it would not be possible to say which of these emotions most prevails at any one time. And if it were, the dance wouldn't have the magic and magnetism that it clearly does, for those within the frame as much as for those of us outside of it. The nakedness of visual expression in this instance reveals a more ambiguous humanity than the all-controlling eye of modernist cinema. The director needs to concede the space for wonder as much as anyone else needs to discover it.

It would be all too easy to reduce Rym's dance to an oppositional framing, to a clash of cultures, civilisations or genders. In fact, there is the sense that, in taking control of this situation, Rym disturbs the subjective narratives of all of the characters involved, rather than simply setting up a structural antagonism. Her non-biological family, often resentful of her presence in their household, opts into the moment, out of necessity and gratitude. Her mother, evidently saddened by the reduction of her daughter's intelligence to sexual display, still seizes the moment to rescue the reputation that the entire family has invested in this endeavour. Nor should the scene be viewed as lacking in complexity as regards its putative audience: in a

display of stamina bordering on the virile, Rym sustains a performance that not only has a history of being sexually inviting to men of whatever race, but appeals to solidarity among the women also. Admittedly, it is quite a threatening appeal, but one that could well be seen as being as empowering as it is sexually aggressive. In not engaging direct eye contact with her audience, Rym makes no attempt to divide them, to make any one in particular feel special (consider, by contrast, Marlene Dietrich in *Blue Angel*). Where she differs from Salomé is in the non-directedness of her endeavour; indeed, it could be said that the primary source of her durability and intensity lies with her family, not least the man who is absent, her stepfather. And when she decides to invite one of the men to dance alongside her, it is notably not one of the customers, which might be seen as a classic touristic gesture intended to undermine the man and upstage his female partner. Instead, she invites one of the accompanying musicians up with her, enough to maintain her audience's curiosity, without reducing it to cliché, which would risk losing the captive moment. One thing the audience cannot possibly appreciate is the degree of sacrifice contained in her actions, but few where they assert their own subjectivity in the sacrifice and the seduction.

When I watch a film like this, with a focus on one particular scene, it serves to surprise students who are accustomed to thinking about scenes such as this in terms of the woman's subjection, as per the Male Gaze theory of Laura Mulvey. They are not used to the possibility that there might be more than one gaze at play in any given scene, and that perhaps the female protagonist can control operations from within the narrative as well as the director. Equally, the scene serves to remind viewers that the white French clientele is not the only group with an interested gaze: the musicians are also complicit in both the orientalist self-consciousness of the dance as well as a culture in which older men are entitled to look at women's bodies without recrimination. With the class, then we consider various aspects of gender, ethnicity and social division that make up this scene, particularly via its modes of representation: how the camera moves between its different subjects, who it is attending to, and how we are to understand it as an eye of its own.

To carry out criticism of this kind is to put our cards on the table: I am not declaring any privileged authority over the scene in question, but sharing in how it sits with me, how I

perceive it. In sharing my own perception, I invite others to do the same, within our community of learning that is responsive to its contextual concerns.

## **Conclusion**

Does all of this amount to a manifesto for extrinsic factors being taken as more significant when it comes to film-pedagogy than those intrinsic to the film itself? No – and I would continue to emphasise that in any given situation, it matters hugely which films we are watching, rather than adopting the line that all films are educational. But unless we are attentive to the conditions of our film-viewing, we are inclined to make all sorts of assertions about the pedagogical potential of film that will not, or cannot, be realised in every case. Perhaps, then, what is needed is a broader understanding of what the curriculum is: not just a body of knowledge, but the embodied engagement of individuals in a community of expressive learning. This is close to what Stanley Cavell calls a curriculum when he says that ““By the prospect of a curriculum, I mean the prospect of a community of teachers and students committed to a path of studies towards some mutually comprehensible and valuable goal” (Cavell, 1981: 268).

The upshot of these contingencies is that students can become critics and judges of their own environment, able to decide for themselves whether their needs are being met, and what the possibilities are for change. And because these sensibilities have been developed alongside and in conversation with others, they are more likely to take the needs of others into account, rather than pursue personal interests and agendas. These contingencies are essential in developing what I would call an attentiveness to reality: thinking about the correspondences between the screened world and the one which we inhabit, rather than thinking of them independently of one another.

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