Book Review

Teachers and teaching on stage and on screen: Dramatic depictions

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Conrad, D., & Prendergast, M. (2019). Teachers and teaching on stage and on screen: Dramatic depictions. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 266 pages, (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-78938-067-5, $52 US

In her book, "Making Movie Magic", Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies (1996), bell hooks argues that movies have pedagogical value and even though that may not be the intention of the movie-makers, consumers are always learning lessons from what they see on screen. In Teachers on Film (2015, p. 49), Tony Brown, in agreement with bell hooks, argued that "films are an important means of conveying cultural and political stories of the times" and through "storytelling, they create a public pedagogy". For Brown, movies have a certain advantage over books because of their appeal to "the ideas and spirit of the time" (p. 49) as they are able to reach a wider audience. Interestingly, this is not a one-way street as "storytelling, especially in film, changes in response to the social, cultural and political concerns of the time, as it also shapes that environment" (p. 49).

The editors and the individual authors of this volume seem to be on the same page with Tony Brown and bell hooks. According to the editors, they had the conviction that a book looking at the portrayals of teachers both on stage and on screen "would offer a tremendous pedagogical resource" (p. 1) as we learn not just from real-life situations but also from fictional stories we encounter on the screen and the stage. As Jaime Beck makes clear in the opening chapter, fiction can create "empathic understanding" (p. 15) as it allows consumers to experience events from different perspectives.

Teachers and Teaching on Stage and on Screen is a multi-authored book that looks at dramatic depictions of teachers in film

and on stage and it lists an impressive array of international scholars and practitioners from all over the globe. As an African, it was very heartening to note that at least one of the articles looked at teacher and teaching portrayals in an African context. The book is divided into five parts, comprising of five articles in each part and, including the editors' introduction, there are 26 chapters in all exploring the main theme of teachers and teaching on stage and on screen.

In Part I, Teacher Reflections/Reflections on Teachers, the authors look at their educational practices through the lenses of various plays and movies. Jamie Beck sets the ball rolling by looking at her research on teacher education through the main character, Erin Gruwell in the movie Freedom Writers. The ending of the movie, Beck argued, draws us away from being critical about the educational system that is unable to ensure that such a passionate teacher remains a teacher and through her research, she is able to open the eyes of readers to a different reality. Next, Phil Duchene, drawing on the "Characteristics of a Successful Learner" model (p. 23), uses the Canadian movie, Why Shoot the Teacher to highlight the difficulties beginner teachers go through in rural settings. Dorothy Morrissey, in the third piece, using the movie Mona Lisa Smile argued that the binary splitting of teachers into good or bad by Hollywood tends to obscure the complexities in teaching and she uses her own performative teaching experience in Ireland to highlight these complexities. In the fourth chapter, Jenny Osorio uses the movie Monsieur Lazhar to explore what she calls a "curriculum of diversity", "explaining how linguistic, cultural, and education system differences are portrayed, and how the teacher and the students navigate these spaces in the film" (p. 41). In the final chapter in this first part, Carl Leggo and Claire Ahn explore irony in the movie Election and their aim is to help teachers, through the use of irony, to adopt critical lenses that would help them "challenge our taken-for-granted views and perspectives, and guide us in imagining new possibilities" (p. 52).

In Part II, Teachers as Heroes or Antiheros the authors turn their lenses on portrayals of teachers as heroes and antiheroes. Angela Ambrosetti begins by looking at teacher identity through the movie adaption of the children's novel, Matilda. She shows how the movie perpetuates the stereotypes of the good versus the bad teacher and how interactions with students shape teacher identity. Next, Nancy Curry and Jeffrey Curry take a look at the portrayal of music teachers through the movie, Mr. Holland's Opus. Using "a

praxial philosophy" lens (p. 64), they counter the narrative of the character of Mr. Holland as a sacrificial hero who lays down his career in music for his students and family. In the third chapter in this second part, Taiwo Afolabi and Stephen Okpadah look at teacher representations in film in Nigeria through the movie, Somewhere in Africa: The Cries of Humanity. They conclude that there is the need for more positive portrayals of teachers in Nigeria, which can be an important resource in the fight against corruption. The fourth chapter by Anita Hallewas, uses the Australian movie, Strictly Dancing, to show how student learners take their learning into their own hands by rejecting the constraining teaching style of their teachers, leading to a certain freedom both for the students and for the teachers. Finally, Patricia Jagger shows through her analysis of the movie, Bad Teacher that there is a complexity to teachers that is not served by the binary portrayals as good or bad.

Part III takes up the theme, Pedagogies/Pedagogical Moments and Claire Coleman and Jane Luton start off by taking a look at arts education through the movie Hunky Dory. Their discussion centers on the contradictory portrayals of arts education, which "is both a reminder and representation of the tenuous, but vital position of arts education" (p. 117). Mitchell McLarnon then examines the "pedagogical encounters" (p. 120) in the movie, School of Rock through the life of the protagonist, who, though not qualified to teach, learns the art of teaching through his students. The lesson the author draws is that if the world is constantly in a flux, teachers have to change as well and become more creative if they are to help educate students to solve societal problems. This leads to the third essay by Matthew Krehl Edwards and Bernadette Walker-Gibbs who argue that the fifth installment in the Harry Potter series, The Order of the Phoenix bears an uncanny resemblance to what is happening in schools presently, where government intervention has led to a loss of autonomy and choice for teachers leading to what the authors call a "pedagogy of misdirection" (p. 131). The fourth chapter in the third part is by Matthew "Gus" Gusul who highlights the successful alternate teaching methods of a white male teacher of black children in the movie, Conrad, and how this can provide a sort of template for indigenous pedagogy. In the final chapter in Part III, Rachael Jacobs highlights, through frame and textual analysis of assessments in the movie, Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, how what pertains in the movie is very different from what actually happens in schools.

In Part IV, Ethics and Desire in Teaching the focus moves to ethical issues and Monica Prendergast starts off with her essay on teaching as a moral act. Drawing on Dwight Conquergood's moral model of teaching as "dialogical performance" (p. 161), the author draws on five plays to show the importance of ethics in cross-cultural teacher-student relationships. Then Ian Tan Xing Long, using the play, The History Boys and Jacques Derrida's idea of supplement, takes a hard look at the realities of teacher-student relationships through the two teachers Irwin and Hector, which ultimately bring up questions "about the aims and purposes of teaching, and the function of education in an increasingly disenchanted and bureaucratic world" (p. 178). In the third essay, through the movie, Kathmandu: A Mirror in the Sky, Ruth Hol Mjanger and three of her colleagues take a look at the ethical implications of international development work, specifically the provision of education in a poor country, using gift-exchange theory. For the authors, the movie raises "ethical awareness about the paradoxes of the gift of education in foreign voluntary work in developing countries" (p. 186). Stig A. Eriksson follows through with an essay based on the play, The Mother by the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht. Through the analysis of the play, the author shows an understanding of how humans learn and how practical considerations are an important feature of the learning process. The final chapter in this section is a posthumous one from Kate Bride. She uses the movie, Mona Lisa Smile to explore how "the film constructs notions of teaching and learning through the fantasy of the teacher as hero", while considering at the same time her own "attachment to Mona Lisa smile as a particular rendition of the teacher as hero fantasy" (p. 200).

The final part, Part V, takes up the theme, Destabilizing Perspectives of Teachers and Teaching and the opening chapter is by Diane Conrad and she looks at "the pedagogy of drug use" (p. 210) through the eyes of white teacher Dan Dunne in the movie Half Nelson. Drawing on concepts from Deleuze and Guattari, the author shows how drug use could teach us a thing or two about teaching and learning. Melissa Tamporello then follows with a discussion of the erotic in teaching and learning through a discussion of the movie, The Piano Teacher, in which the main character is seen as both passionate (committed) and sexy. Even though the movie ends on a sour note, the author's intention is to get educators and learners talking about this issue rather than pretending it does not exist. In the end, both students and teachers will benefit from such

frankness. The third chapter in this section by Carmen Rodriguez de France draws on the play, Education is Our Right to highlight the very sensitive issue of the residential school system and charts Canada's path of truth and reconciliation with indigenous communities. In the penultimate chapter, Anita Sinner and Thibault Zimmer, through the movie, Art School Confidential, "address student-teacher dynamics" (p. 236), which brought up critical discussions about how teachers can be engaged in the work of changing negative stereotypes. As the authors stated, some students were offended by the movie but the whole idea was to deal with important societal issues, something the authors felt was a "pedagogic responsibility" (p. 243). Sean Wiebe and Pauline Sameshima author the final article in this volume. They invite us to think differently about teaching and education through the movie, Irrational Man. Through the philosophical system known as existentialism, the authors show how educational existentialism is a better way to approach teaching than educational idealism as it "encourages critical thinking through the pursuit of one's own freedom" (p. 253).

The strength of this volume lies in the call by the authors, implicitly and explicitly, for a critical media literacy. Popular culture can be fun and sometimes offensive but it is also a reflection of society and contributes to our ideas of the kind of society we want to live in. When we consume popular culture, we are also imbibing philosophical arguments about social organization and it is imperative to develop the critical awareness necessary to see through these popular representations. A good example is Jaime Beck's article, which goes beyond the happy ending of the movie, Freedom Writers to dig out the complexities of the world a teacher lives in. As she argues, if we accept the ending of the movie, "we are … led away from a critical discussion of why this highly skilled and passionate teacher could not continue doing a job she seemed both destined and committed to doing" (p. 15).

I would have loved to see a stronger engagement with the perils and challenges associated with the use of popular culture as pedagogy. Some of the authors alluded to that implicitly, but given its importance, at least an article should have been devoted to it. For instance, Kate Bride states that "popular culture texts not only reinforce, but shape our views and beliefs about teaching and learning" (p. 207). This is a danger pedagogues should be aware of – that in designing curriculum using popular culture, the emphasis should be on critical consumption otherwise it could end up

reinforcing the very things we want to stamp out. Anita Sinner and Thibalt Zimmer, in their paper, also talk about the unforeseen ways in which showing the movie, Art School Confidential "provoked responses of profound offence by some members of the class" (p. 236) whereas others might have seen it as just good fun. Both responses are fraught with danger and awareness of these challenges would go a long way to help pedagogues make the best use of popular culture material in class. There was also a typographical error on page 16, which should be corrected in a later edition. I quote first the full sentence as presented in the book and then present what it should have been. "The following offers an opportunity to reframe the Freedom writer's narrative, and perhaps to being to imagine a system in which exceptional teachers thrive …" The correct sentence should read, "The following offers an opportunity to reframe the Freedom writer's narrative and perhaps to begin to imagine a system in which exceptional teachers thrive …"

Notwithstanding the weaknesses noted above, this is an excellent resource for pedagogues everywhere and as Kaela Jubas (Developing a Pedagogy of Critical Curiosity in Professional Education, 2019) has noted, popular culture helps us to develop the critical curiosity necessary in the fight for social justice and to make the world a better place.

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