HOLLYWOOD FILM AS PUBLIC PEDAGOGY: EDUCATION IN THE CROSSFIRE

Any analysis of how Hollywood films represent the diverse worlds of teachers, students, and schools must begin with a subtle paradox: focusing on schools, Hollywood cinema highlights the central importance of education in our society, yet at the same time fails to be self-critical about its own role as a powerful and influential pedagogical site. What is often obscured in this disavowal is that by defining itself almost exclusively as entertainment, the movie industry conceals the political and ideological nature of the pedagogical work it performs. Also missing from this conceit of political and pedagogical neutrality, as Jacques Rancière puts it, is the nature of the authority through which film, as a mode of cultural production, legitimizes “a certain regime of identification, a certain distribution of the visible, the sayable, and the possible.” As forms of public pedagogy, films must be understood in terms of their political and educational character and how they align with broader social, racial, economic, class, and institutional configurations. In particular, Hollywood films about schools not only play an influential role in mobilizing particular meanings, affective investments, desires, and values related to our everyday understanding of the teaching profession and education, but also play a crucial role in legitimating the purpose of schooling, the definition of teaching and learning, and what constitutes important classroom knowledge. Most importantly, they shape habits of thinking by providing audiences with framing mechanisms and affective structures through which individuals fashion their identities and mediate their relationship to public life, social responsibility, and the demands of critical citizenship. For better or worse, Hollywood films are not merely elements of screen culture that reproduce a certain regime of identification, affective structures through which film, as a mode of cultural production, legitimizes “a certain regime of identification, a certain distribution of the visible, the sayable, and the possible.” As forms of public pedagogy, films must be understood in terms of their political and educational character and how they align with broader social, racial, economic, class, and institutional configurations. In particular, Hollywood films about schools not only play an influential role in mobilizing particular meanings, affective investments, desires, and values related to our everyday understanding of the teaching profession and education, but also play a crucial role in legitimating the purpose of schooling, the definition of teaching and learning, and what constitutes important classroom knowledge. Most importantly, they shape habits of thinking by providing audiences with framing mechanisms and affective structures through which individuals fashion their identities and mediate their relationship to public life, social responsibility, and the demands of critical citizenship. For better or worse, Hollywood films are not merely elements of screen culture that reproduce a magical combination of entertainment and fantasy. On the contrary, they function as emotionally charged, image-saturated cultural practices where the coordinates of dominant power are often constructed and the “state of things” seem evident, unquestionable.

Given the current assault on public education in the United States by the Bush Administration, it becomes crucial to analyze Hollywood films about education in terms of how they privilege some meanings over others, particularly those ideas and values that reinforce the current attack on public education and include the emphasis on zero-tolerance policies, privatization, high-stakes testing, the de-skilling of teachers, and the imposition of business models of schooling. Surely films of the last two decades from Dead Poets Society (1989, by Peter Weir) to Freedom Writers (2007, by Richard LaGravenese) can be analyzed for how they connect—or more often fail to connect—schools to broader matters of fairness, justice, anti-racism, and the imperatives of a democratic society, and how they work through a systematic production of the given to define the shape of the visible, the unthinkable, and the possible. They can also be read critically for the kinds of identities, desires, and forms of agency that they mobilize and legitimate.

As a form of public pedagogy, film registers a profound transformation regarding how people are educated in American culture today. What has become increasingly clear in the last few decades is that the major sites of education lie outside of the schools and reside in the wider screen culture and the new electronically driven media that range from digital film to the Internet to the hyper-mediated space of the Apple iPhone. Formal schooling may be an ongoing subject of Hollywood films, but schools are no longer the most important site for educating young people. The new screen technologies and media have produced a cultural landscape that now constitutes unique and powerful sites of learning. This multimedia landscape, delivered in an endless array of forms and through previously unimaginable platforms, comprises what I call new modes of public pedagogy. Living in such an image-saturated culture, one cannot help but notice the power of the media to shape public consciousness, legitimize specific political agendas, influence how individual choices are made, and determine how policies are enacted. I have watched for over twenty-five years how Hollywood films have produced a number of complex, but often conservative if not reactionary representations about schooling. Early films such as Stand and Deliver (1988, by Ramon Menendez) with its emphasis on teaching for the test, to Dangerous Minds (1995, by John N. Smith) and 187 (1997, by Kevin Reynolds) affirmed the racist unconscious of dominant white culture by equating urban schools with images of menacing, poor youth of color and with the culture of crime. More recent films such as Half Nelson (2006, by Ryan Fleck), suggest that the only outlet for critically engaged teachers bucking the system is to descend into the dark world of addictive drugs. Of course, while films such as Half Nelson and Freedom Writers capture some of the important political, racial, and class dynamics at work in urban schools, even films that attempt to move beyond the Hollywood traffic in tired clichés and stereotypes ultimately collapse into a highly privatized discourse that erases larger social and historical forces or dissolve into a saccharine melodrama or paralyzing cynicism.

ABOVE
Still From Freedom Writers (2007) by Richard LaGravenese
While deciphering the ideological content and representational politics of films is an important pedagogical task, it is also crucial to place them in concrete historical circumstances. If we are to read films as social and political allegories articulating deeply rooted fears, desires, and visions of the future, then they have to be understood within a broader network of cultural spheres, social formations, and institutions rather than as isolated texts. That is, they have to be critically engaged within the social anxieties and assumptions that prompted their production and their circulation as public texts in the first place.

Of course, our task is not merely to read such films to determine whether their representations distort reality, but more importantly to engage those hidden messages, exclusions, and social practices that loosen the bonds of the visible, the sensible, and the landscape of the possible.6 Hollywood and independent films—especially films about schools, teachers, and students—offer a unique opportunity for academics, teachers, and other concerned citizens to use the medium of film to engage in pedagogical struggles that foster conditions that enable young people to read against the official lies of power, received opinions, and unexamined assumptions that tend to erase everything that matters in a vibrant democracy. More importantly, such films can be engaged dialectically as part of a wider educational task of providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to connect classroom knowledge to broader questions of power, politics, and public consciousness. At best, as both a public text and a pedagogical practice, any film that deals with education can be a useful optic for enabling students to recognize both education as an essential public good and democracy as the very condition for exercising any critical and viable notion of individual and social agency.

Given the influence of films in shaping our perception of social reality in general (as well as education, youth, modes of authority, care and commitment), it is crucial that educators develop pedagogical interventions that enable young people not only to read these films critically, but also to understand how they embody forms of knowledge, values, desires, and social relations implicated in power as well as presuppose specific notions of what it means to be educated, to be a citizen, and to embrace a particular notion of the future. The following is an indicative analysis of how such films might be used as a pedagogical tool for engaging the educational force of the wider culture and to demonstrate how a critical engagement with such films can be used to produce new understandings of literacy, agency, and social responsibility. Hollywood films can provide pedagogical opportunities for young people to watch, critically interpret, and engage these larger-than-life embodiments of screen culture as part of a broader project, not only to seriously consider the relationship between critical education and democracy, but also to defend both films as important public texts and schools as vital democratic public spheres.

**BREAKING INTO AND OUT OF THE MOVIES**

My relationship to Hollywood films cannot be separated from the attractions they had for me growing up in Smith Hill, a working-class neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island, in the 1950s. While my friends and I had access to the small screen of black-and-white television, it held none of the mystery, fascination, and pleasure found in the five or six grand movie theaters that lined the main drag downtown. Every Saturday afternoon, we would walk several miles to the business district, concocting elaborate schemes to get into the theaters without having to pay. None of us could afford to buy tickets, so we had to be inventive about ways to sneak into the theaters without being caught. Sometimes we would simply wait next to the exit doors and, as soon as somebody left the theater, we would rush in and bury ourselves in the plush seats, hoping that none of the ushers spotted us. We were not always so lucky. At other times, we would pool our money and have one person buy a ticket and, at the most strategic moment, he would open the exit door from the inside and let us into the theater.

Hollywood film engendered a profound sense of danger and otherness for us. Gaining access to the movies meant we had to engage in illicit behavior, risking criminal charges or a beating by an irate theater owner. But the fear of getting caught was outweighed by the lure of adventure and the joy we associated with the silver screen. Once we got inside the movie theater we were transported into an event. We were able to participate in a public act of viewing that was generally restricted for kids in our neighborhood because films were too expensive for the penniless youth and quite removed from the daily experiences of kids who were generally considered too restless and uncultured to sit in a movie theater without talking, laughing, and disturbing a public space meant for family entertainment. Silence in the movie theaters was imposed on us by the fear of being noticed. Yet the thrill of adventure and the expectation of what was about to unfold before us was well worth the self-imposed discipline, the contained silence, and the focus that such viewing demanded. Back on the street, the movies enabled a space of dialogue, criticism, and solidarity for us. Movies were a source of shared joy, entertainment, escape, and though we were too young to realize it at the time, a source of vital knowledge—unlike what we were privy to in school—that connected pleasure to meaning. Sometimes we saw as many as three double features in one day. When we left the movie theater,
the cinematography and narratives that we had viewed filled our conversations and our dreams. We argued, sometimes actually fought, over the films’ meanings and relevance to our lives. Hollywood films took us out of the limited confines of our Smith Hill neighborhood, offered narratives that rubbed against the often rigid identities we inhabited, and provided objects of desire that left us dreaming about possibilities far removed from the burdens and problems that dominated our working-class neighborhood. Films pointed to a terrain of deeply sought freedom, located in an inner world of dreams and reinforced by the private experiences of pleasure and joy, enabled by the twin seduction of escape and entertainment.

We had no language to understand how Hollywood films erased many things we confronted in our daily lives or how they gave us a glimpse of a more politically nuanced view of the world, occasionally even reconfiguring the boundaries between the private and public—albeit by often reducing public issues to problems of personal character and self-responsibility. Yet the films we viewed with such awe had an unrealized potential to carry us beyond the privatized confines of our daily existence. It was only when I started working as a high school teacher that I began to address films seriously as a pedagogical and political tool with relevance in the class that far exceeded their traditional use as a welcomed respite for teachers and entertainment for the students.

The choices I made about what films to show in my classes were determined by the overtly educational content that each offered students in terms of alternative views of the world. Films both challenged print culture as the only viable source of knowledge and were attractive cultural texts for students because they were not entirely contaminated by the logic of formal schooling. In opposition to the heavy reliance on the lock-step, traditional curricular materials, I would rent documentaries from a local Quaker group in order to present students with a critical perspective on the Vietnam War, poverty, youth-oriented issues, the Cold War, and a host of other social concerns. My students and I discussed the films we viewed in terms of the ideologies they seemed to privilege and how they worked to move mass audiences and break the continuity of common sense. Films now became crucial counter-texts for me, useful as a resource to offset dominant textbook ideologies and invaluable as a pedagogical tool to challenge officially sanctioned knowledge and modes of learning.

At that point in my teaching experience, I still had not figured out that films played a powerful role pedagogically in the wider culture as well. Nor did I ever quite figure out how my students felt about these films. Far removed from the glamour of Hollywood, these documentary narratives were often heavy-handed ideologically, displaying little investment in irony, humor, or self-critique. Certainly my own reception of them was marked by ambivalence. In this way, films became important as a way of clarifying my role as a critical teacher and of broadening my understanding of the transformative possibilities of pedagogy; but there was a price to pay for such an approach.

Both the traditional notion that films were forms of light entertainment and the more radical argument that dismissed films as one-dimensional commodities seemed crass to me. Films no longer seemed to offer me pleasure as my relationship to them was now largely conceived in narrow, instrumental terms. As a subversive resource to enhance my teaching, I focused on films in ways that seemed to ignore how they functioned as sites of affective investment, mobilizing a range of desires while invoking the incidental, visceral, and transitory. I had a limited understanding of how film could not only offer alternative modes of knowing, but also alter the flow of experience, emotion, and possibility. Films unconsciously became formalized objects of detached academic analysis for me. I attempted to organize films around important critical themes, but in doing so I did not link films to broader aspects of public concern—connecting them to audiences, identities, and events within the concrete relations of power that characterized everyday life. I used a limited notion of theory as a way of legitimating film as a social text, rather than as a site where different possibilities of uses and effects intersect, subjectivities are shaped, and dominant narratives rewritten. I wanted students to read films critically, but I displayed little concern with how such films were implicated in the production of my students’ own ideologies, desires, and sense of agency. Film in this approach was merely a resource to appropriate oppositional ideas and information. By being overly concerned with how films might be used as alternative educational texts, I also failed to understand and to impart to my students the powerful role played by film within a visual culture that increasingly employed new forms of pedagogy, signaled different forms of literacy, and exemplified a mode of politics in which “culture [had become] a crucial site and weapon of power in the modern world.” Nor did I understand the necessity to educate students not only as cultural critics but also as cultural producers.

Today, even a casual observer can see the potency and power of the movie industry and its influence upon the popular imagination and public consciousness. The power of its reach and extent of its commodification can be seen as film tie-ins are used to sell t-shirts, cups, posters, bumper stickers, and a variety of kitsch. But at the same time, the growing popularity of film as a compelling mode of communication and form of public pedagogy—a visual technology that functions as a powerful teaching machine—suggests how important it has become as a site of cultural politics. All one has to call to mind are Disney’s ongoing film representations of American youth as racially bleached, politically homogenized, utterly scrubbed symbols of middle-class innocence in films such as High School Musical I and II (2006 and 2007, by Kenny Ortega). Herman Gray captures this sentiment in arguing that “culture and the struggles over representation that take place there are not just substitutes for some ‘real’ politics that they inevitably replace or at best delay; they simply represent a different, but no less important, site in the contemporary technological and postindustrial society where political struggles take place.” But struggles over meaning must be matched by a cultural politics and pedagogy that encourage the production of meaning as well. That is, educators and other cultural workers need to provide the pedagogical conditions for students to use media technology to produce their own films and other cultural products, thereby fostering the skills and knowledge necessary for students to create counter-public spheres capable of producing alternative and multiple accounts of the world in which they live.
As the opportunities for civic education and public engagement begin to disappear, film may qualify as one of the few media left that enables conversations that connect politics, personal experiences, and public life to larger social issues. Using films in my university classes during the last two decades, it has become clear to me that film connects to students’ experiences in multiple ways that oscillate between the lure of film as entertainment and the provocation of film as a cultural practice. On the one hand, many students, feeling powerless and insecure in a society marked by a cutthroat economy, the ongoing privatization of almost everything, a runaway individualism celebrated daily on Reality TV, and a breakdown of all notions of public life, find a sense of relief and escape in the spectacle of film. On the other hand, many students see in the public issues addressed by film culture a connection to public life that revitalizes their sense of agency and resonates well with their sense of the importance of the cultural terrain as a source of both knowledge and critical dialogue. At best, films offer my students an opportunity to connect the theoretical discourses we engage in both knowledge and critical dialogue. At best, films offer my students with their sense of the importance of the cultural terrain as a source of reality of almost everything, a runaway individualism celebrated daily. On the one hand, many students, feeling powerless and insecure in film as entertainment and the provocation of film as a cultural practice, students’ experiences in multiple ways that oscillate between the high and low of the last two decades, it has become clear to me that film connects to conversations that connect politics, personal experiences, and public life. What is more, film is a form of public pedagogy Hollywood film combines entertainment and politics and lays claim to public memory, though in contested ways given the existence of distinctly varied social and cultural formations. Yet films are potentially more than commodified vehicles of public memory. Mining the twin operations of desire and nostalgia, they are also sites of educated hopes and hyper-mediated experiences that connect the personal and the social by bridging the contradictory and overlapping relations between private discourses and public life. While films play an important role in highlighting particular ideologies and values as worthy of public conversation, they also provide a pedagogical space that opens up the “possibility of interpretation as intervention.” As public pedagogies, they make clear the need for forms of literacy that address the profoundly political and pedagogical ways in which knowledge is constructed and enters our lives in what Susan Bordo calls “an image-saturated culture.” For educators and others, this means encouraging the ethical and practical task of analyzing critically how films function as social practices that influence their everyday lives and position them within existing social, cultural, and institutional machineries of power. This also means understanding how the historical and contemporary meanings produced by films operate to align, reproduce, and interrupt broader sets of ideas, discourses, and social configurations at work in the larger society.

**FILM AS PUBLIC PEDAGOGY**

Films no longer constitute merely another method of teaching for me, but now represent a new form of pedagogical text—one that does not simply reflect culture but actually constructs it—and thus signals the need for a radically different perspective on literacy and the relationship between film texts and society. The power and pervasiveness of films not only call into question their status as cultural products, but also raise serious questions about how their use of spectatorial pleasure and symbolic meaning works to put into play people’s attitudes and orientation toward others and the material circumstances of their own lives. The importance of films as a form of public pedagogy also raises questions about the educational force of the larger culture and demands the recognition that to make knowledge meaningful, critical, and transformative, it is necessary to understand, engage, and make accountable those modes of learning that shape students’ identities outside of the school. Of course, there is always the risk of using popular cultural forms such as Hollywood film as a way of policing students’ pleasures and in doing so undermining the sense of joy and entertainment that films provide. But, as Margaret Miles points out, it would be an ethical and pedagogical mistake to allow students to believe that films are merely about entertainment, or at the same time to suggest that the pleasure of entertainment is identical to the “learned pleasure of analysis.” Scrutinizing the pleasure of entertainment in films, James Snead points out that “[t]rue never has been enough to just see a film—and now, more than ever, we need, not just to ‘see,’ but to ‘see through’ what we see on the screen.” Snead is not denying the importance of how film mobilizes affective investments. Rather, he wants educators to recognize that such investments often connect people and power through mechanisms of identification and affect that effectively undermine the energies of critical engagement. Snead’s comments suggest that students must think seriously about how films not only give meaning to their lives but also mobilize their desires in powerful ways. In this way, seeing through films means developing the critical skills to engage how the ideological and the affective work in combination to offer up particular ways of viewing the world. Educators and students gain a new source of pleasure through the insights they bring to the workings of film culture. This new pleasure in film as an object of pedagogical analysis stems in part from understanding the massive social impact of film, which now assumes such a major educational role in shaping the lives of many individuals and groups.

As a teaching form, film often puts into play issues that enter the realm of public discourse, debate, and policymaking in diverse and sometimes dramatic ways—whether we are talking about films that make racism visible, challenge homophobia, or provide provocative representations that address the themes of war, violence, masculinity, sexism, and poverty. Uniquely placed between the privatized realm of the home and other public spheres, film provides a distinct space in which a range of contradictory issues and meanings enter public discourse, sometimes in a subversive fashion addressing pressing issues in American society. As a space of translation, they also bridge the gap between private and public discourses, play an important role in putting particular ideologies and values into public conversation, and offer a pedagogical space for addressing how a society views itself and the public world of power, events, politics, and institutions. I make no claims suggesting that there is a direct correlation between what people see, hear, and read, and how they act, between the representations they are exposed to and the actual events that shape their lives. But I do argue that film as a form of civic engagement and public pedagogy creates a climate that helps to shape individual
behavior and public attitudes in multiple and complex ways, consciously or unconsciously.

The entertainment industry is the second largest export of the United States—second only to military aircraft. It is estimated that a successful film is seen by 10 million people in theaters, and millions more when it is aired on cable and exported to foreign markets. Moreover, the film industry is controlled by a very limited number of corporations that exercise enormous power in all major facets of movie-making—production, distribution, and circulation in the U.S. and abroad. At the same time, media culture is not an unchanging, monolithic bastion of corporate and ruling-class power; a critical approach to media and film should not reduce either their messages to unified narratives or their audiences to passive dupes. Films, like other media, work to gain consent, and operate within limits set by the contexts in which it is taken up. Hence, it is crucial to analyze films in ways that link texts to contexts, culture to the institutional specificity of power, pedagogy to the politics of representation, affective investments to the construction of particular notions of agency, and learning to public intervention. By taking up films intertextually, it becomes possible to foreground not just questions of meaning and interpretation, but also questions of effects, politics, power, agency, and social transformation.

The ubiquity and importance of film as a mode of public pedagogy offers educators both an opportunity and a challenge to connect film as a cultural practice to broader public considerations, social relations, and institutional formations, as well as to important social issues. How films derive their meanings and how specific claims are made by different audiences on films must be addressed through neither the narrow lens of film theory nor the somewhat limited lens of reception theory, but through a broader assemblage of cultural texts, discourses, and institutional formations. Meaning should not be sutured into a text, closed off from the myriad contexts in which it is produced, circulated, and renegotiated. Nor should the primacy of signification exist at the expense of engaging material relations of power. On the contrary, films become relevant as public pedagogies to the degree to which they are situated within a broader politics of representation, one that suggests that the struggle over meanings is, in part, defined as a struggle over culture, power, and politics. The problem with Hollywood movies is not that they can be understood in multiple ways, but that some of the meanings they produce have a force that other meanings do not; that is, some meanings gain a certain legitimacy and become the defining terms of reality because of how well they resonate and align under certain conditions with broader discourses, dominant ideologies, and existing material relations of power.

In my own approach to the pedagogy of cultural politics, I emphasize in my classes that I approach films as serious objects of social, political, and cultural analysis; moreover, as part of an attempt to read films politically, I make it clear that I bring a certain set of assumptions, experiences, and ideas to my engagement with films. But at the same time, I try to emphasize that in doing so I am not suggesting that my analyses in any way offer authoritative interpretations that make a claim to either certainty or finality. Not only do I encourage a critique of my own interpretations and analyses of film; I also urge students to develop their own positions as part of a critical engagement with various perspectives, including my own, that develop amid class dialogue and in conjunction with outside readings and reviews. The pedagogical challenge is to make a convincing case that my analyses of films are necessarily partial, incomplete, and open to revision and contestation. Rather than closing down student participation, my own interpretations are meant to be strategic and positional, eschewing the notion that any type of closure is endemic to my perspective on particular films while at the same time using my own position to encourage students to think more critically about their interpretations as they enter into dialogue about films. Critical analysis under such circumstances is not replaced or shut down, but expanded by encouraging students to enter into dialogue with both the films and the interpretations that frame them, thus engaging the meaning, function, and role of film as a pedagogical, moral, and political practice that can only be understood within a range of theoretically constructed practices, relations, and frameworks. Addressing films within a framework that is both defined and problematized signals to students and others the pedagogical value of their taking a position while not standing still.

Films both shape and bear witness to the ethical and political dilemmas that animate the broader social landscape and often raise fundamental questions about how we think about politics and political agency in light of such recognition. Critique as a form of self-analysis and a mode of social criticism is central to any notion of film analysis that takes seriously the project of understanding just how cultural politics matters in the everyday lives of people and

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Above: Still From Alpha Dog (2007) by Nick Cassavetes
what it might mean to make interventions that are both critical and transformative. Films can enable people to think more critically about how art can contribute to constructing public spaces that expand the possibilities for pleasure and political agency, democratic relations, and social justice. As a form of public pedagogy, film provides teachers, students, and others outside of the academy the opportunity to examine Hollywood films critically—in spite of their unquestioned fetishization of entertainment, spectacle, and glamour—in terms of how they not only encourage us to understand (or misunderstand) the wider culture but also influence us to live our lives.

In every class I teach, I use widely accessible films that deal with complex and provocative subject matter, highlighting a number of important social issues, problems, and values that provoke the public imaginary, and in many cases have generated substantial controversy. In addressing film as a form of cultural politics and an important mode of public pedagogy, educators can engage the pedagogical and political practice of film in ways that render due account of the complexities of film culture itself. At the same time, such educators need to challenge a voyeuristic reception of films by offering students the theoretical resources necessary to critically engage how dominant practices of representation work to secure individual desires, organize specific forms of identification, and regulate particular modes of understanding, knowledge, and agency. Taking films seriously as a vehicle of public pedagogy means examining how their practices and values embody relations of power and ideological assumptions (admittedly in contradictory ways) that both mirror and construct the interests, fears, longings, and anxieties of the periods in which they were produced and viewed. Accordingly, this suggests developing pedagogical practices that promote political engagement, challenge conventional ways of thinking about film as simply entertainment, and use film as a cultural text to bridge the gap between the academic discourse of the classroom and social issues that animate the larger society.

As a young boy watching films in Providence, I believed that movies only provided the diversion of entertainment. I had no idea they also played an active role in shaping my sense of agency, offering me a moral and political education that largely went unnoticed and uncontested. Films have been a great source of joy throughout my life. Now they not only provide pleasure, but also enable me to think more critically about both how power operates within the realm of the cultural and how social relations and identities are forged. All films disseminate ideologies, beckon in sometimes clear and always contradictory ways toward visions of the future, and encourage and stultify diverse ways of being in the world. Most importantly, film constitutes a powerful force for shaping public commitments, hope, popular consciousness, and social agency, and as such invites people into a broader public conversation. As a horizon of “sensory experience and discursive contestation,” films engender a public space where knowledge and pleasure intersect—no small matter as public life becomes increasingly controlled and regulated, if not militarized. It is in this promise of education and sensuality that films become other, gesturing toward public spheres in which critical dialogue, pleasure, shared interaction, and public participation flourish. Film registers as both a public dialogue and a set of experiences that offer the opportunity to revitalize those democratic public spheres in which the popular intersects with the pedagogical and the political in ways that suggest that film cannot be dismissed simply as a commodity, but now becomes crucial to expanding democratic relations, ideologies, and identities.

CONCLUSION

Struggles over how we view, represent, and critically engage films about education should be part of a larger public dialogue about how to develop a new vocabulary, a set of theoretical tools, and pedagogical practices for re-visioning civic engagement and re-inscribing the possibilities for democratic public life. We have entered a period in which representations of education bear all of the scars and marks of a damaged democracy. Schools are under siege by a number of anti-democratic forces, and it is clear that those in power at the highest levels of government would like to turn them into either test centers, training programs, or simply low-intensity security blocks to warehouse the poor and other populations considered disposable. What has become evident is that the crisis of schooling has to be understood as part of the crisis of democracy itself, and that many Hollywood and independent films not only provide on occasion a glimpse of that crisis, but can also unleash imaginative possibilities for dialogue, engagement, and thoughtfulness, all the while giving force to the crucial political insight that such films have relevance for how we conceive ourselves as engaged public intellectuals, responsible citizens, and communities of solidarity.

Screen culture is a dynamic mode of cultural production and we cannot predict what Hollywood or independent films will look like in the near future. What is clear is that this ongoing dynamic revolution in film culture will require new pedagogies, create new public spaces demanding new roles for educators and others, and most certainly refuse any fast and fixed understanding of the relationship between film and pedagogy. On the one hand, and the demands of public life, critique, and social responsibility on the other. All we have now are hints of what is to come.19

Of course, films cannot be engaged simply at the level of symbolic culture or through an analysis of their pedagogical character; they are also part of a mammoth culture industry largely dominated by a handful of corporations that exercise enormous power over what can

ABOVE
Still From Dead Poets Society (1989) by Peter Weir
and cannot be seen and heard in the public sphere. Like the schools they often portray, Hollywood films cannot escape the larger set of structuring discourses, ordering principles, instrumental rationalities, and material relations of power that legitimate the multiple narratives that shape our everyday lives. Of greatest importance is the potentially transformative pedagogy that schools and the film industry have in common: they provide the conditions for educating both young and old about the histories they inherit, the present in which they live, and the future on offer to them. Both educate about and intersect with daily life, and should be taken seriously as sites of struggle. They not only provide dominant narratives about education, schools, student life, and what it means to be a good or bad teacher; but give meaning to the experiences of young people in contemporary culture. What they offer is far from innocent, nor is it always on the side of justice and democracy. Yet both are crucial public spheres where it is possible to glimpse the promise of a better future and a substantive democracy. It is in the struggle over such spaces of radical imagination that emergent representations, visions, and pedagogical practices can combine hope and social responsibility as part of a broader emancipatory discourse. As a form of public pedagogy, films gain their most salient meanings and significance, because in their shimmering images and larger-than-life representations of struggle resides both an opening for critical engagement and an affirmation of civic courage. Here the possibility exists that everyone might become more acutely aware of the implications of Robert Hass’s insight that the job of education is imminently moral and political, because its purpose is “to refresh the idea of justice going dead in us all the time.”

HENRY A. GIROUX holds the Global TV Network Chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada.
