

The Cinematography of Education

— Popular Discourse(s) of Education and Its Pedagogical Utility —

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People generally spend approximately 7,000 hours a year in schools in the first six years of primary education (Jackson, 1990; Labaree, 1999). Many would spend more hours in schools if they pursue higher degrees. School is thus a very familiar institution for many; and thus it invites numerous arguments from all parts of a society. Dan C. Lortie (1975) in his well-known sociological study, *Schoolteacher*, argues that spending thousands of hours in a classroom itself provides some apprenticeships in teaching to those in the classrooms. As Lortie presents, one's participation in learning in classrooms gives familiarity to the practice of education and forms perspectives on public education and its institutions.

It is inarguable that participating in classroom learning has a significant impact on forming one's familiarity and perception toward school education and its systems. However, participation itself would not be the only source for people to generate their perspectives and understandings on public education and its institutional mechanisms because people also spend much greater amount of time outside of schools. Schools are only a part of socializing institutions people engage. Even when schools could generate tremendous impacts, they are not isolated from other parts of the society.

Furthermore, the perception (image) of teaching has much to contribute student teachers' resistance to the ideas implemented in teacher education programs (Labaree, 1999). The gap between the perceived idea—image—of teaching and the reality of teaching has generated significant difficulties not only for teacher educators, but also for the population in general. People construct their expectation and aspiration versus public education and its institutions not necessarily based on reality, but rather on what they perceive as the reality. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how people construct their perception toward education and its systems more in details. Not limited to the direct involvement of people within the structure of education, but exploring the indirect or even what

seem to be irrelevant involvements in education and its systems, would generate a much clearer picture of perceived ideas toward education and its institutions.

Popular cultural portrayals of knowledge, classrooms, students, curriculum, and other aspects of education would be a solid place to start when investigating the popular perception of education and its systems. Visual media, such as motion pictures and television programs in particular, are the most apposite media for examining popular perceptions because they tend to record both feelings and attitudes that are dominant in the period they are made (Rollins, 1979). It was Garth Jowett who first identified motion pictures as “a major socializing agency” (Jowett, 1976) particularly during the first half of the twentieth century. Jowett illuminates how films have come to symbolize change and how special interest groups—religious, civic, political, and other groups—came to utilize the symbolized power of films to instigate changes to society.

Utilizing the symbols and symbolized power to transmit desired changes in a society is somewhat parallel to how many interest groups have employed education to initiate desired changes to the society. Thus it can be argued that education in part of such media that on one hand reflects the feelings and attitudes of the time, while also generating feelings and attitudes in people. For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that education and its roles are construction of public perception, which are generated not only by education itself, but also by a variety of popular cultural forces in a society.

This study, therefore, illuminates the complex structure of education by taking the study of education and its systems out from their isolation from other social structures. Through exploring how popular culture has perceived aspects on education, this study will attempt to reposition the thinking about education in the larger complexity of society. This repositioning will enable us to gain a better picture of popular perceptions about education, which, I believe,

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would be a necessary step to further the discourse on education. Relocating education into much larger and complex social structural contexts would problematize the taken-for-granted notions in the discourse on education, such as the notion of *public, power, and knowledge and learning* in the discussions on education; and thus dispel mystified realities in the practices and ideas about education.

Literature Review

David Smith argues in *Teacher Education as a Form of Discourse* that teacher education has become the way to conserve the institution as it has come to shape its own discourse. Smith claims that the establishment of such a discourse disables the perspectives of others (or others with differing discourse) to contribute to or challenge the dialogue within the discourse. Although it is arguable whether the Japanese teacher education has constructed a discourse or it is a discourse at all, Smith's argument is notable for it identifies the possibility that teacher education "has, overtime, developed its own in-house language and sets of procedures which define it, and within which the various stakeholders feel at home" (Smith, 1999).

What Smith problematizes in teacher education is very much applicable to how people perceive or relate to education in general. The sense of familiarity about teaching and the educational systems generates in people a "self-enclosed semantic and practical universe within which people operate 'as if' everyone knew what everyone else is talking about" (Smith, 1999: 89). This sense of familiarity reflects what Deborah Britzman (1986) calls "cultural myths". The sense of familiarity, which is generated with and by cultural myths, does not quite reflect the reality although it is not necessarily based on completely false ideas. The familiarity rather mystifies practices of education and its institutions, and thus prevents anyone for perceiving complexity in the structure generating power, authority, and knowledge in and surrounding education and its systems. Recognition of such cultural myths is crucial in order to be aware of the structural contexts of education because it would generate dialogue beyond the realm of education and its enclosed discourse (Stack & Kelly, 2006; Verdoodt et al., 2010).

It is unquestionable that there are many factors generating and reinforcing cultural myths both within and outside of the educational system. Mary M. Dalton (2010), for example, studies Hollywood portrayals of teachers to illuminate what popular culture identifies

as the characteristics of a good teacher. Dalton presents apolitical and independent characterizations of good teachers in mainstream Hollywood films. She identifies the presence of dilemmas and frustrations of people toward education and its systems often represented by stubborn administrators or other authority figures with whom they cannot have a dialogue. While presented as a rebellious and antagonistic to the social order, Dalton characterizes that the Hollywood representation of good teachers is very much based on their ability to translate and transport the social order to the disorderly subjects or environments. Dalton has successfully made Hollywood representation of good teachers in order to dispel the very presence of frustrations and dilemmas in the public arena toward education and its systems. However, her study did not go further to discuss how such portrayals generate the construction of cultural myths around education and its systems.

Films are not only a registrar of "the feelings and attitudes of the periods in which they are made" (Collins, 1998: 250), but they are also, as argued by Garth Jowett, "a major socializing agency," which transmits the "symbols of change" (Jowett, 1976). Quoting the great success of motion pictures—particularly cartoons—instructing soldiers and workers during the wartime, Walt Disney advocated further employment of motion pictures in educating nation's youth right at the end of the last world war (Disney, 1945). Bugs Bunny (Warner Brothers), Donald Duck, and even Mickey Mouse all took a part in the last world war. They are cartoons mainly for children, but they all participated eagerly and joyfully in the nation's war efforts. The motion pictures instructed people explicitly as to their assigned roles in the war; yet it is more significant that the motion pictures also implicitly prepared popular minds to support the war.

As exemplified by Disney and his uses of the motion pictures during the war, motion pictures not only represent feelings and attitudes in the mass population, but they also *construct* the popular mind. In other words, the motion picture is a *construction* of popular discourse, but it also *constructs* the popular discourse dialectically. Since popular culture—particularly represented in motion pictures and other forms of mass media—not only reflects but also constructs the perception of mass population [masses], studying how popular culture represents education and its systems would dismantle the border that isolates the realm of education from its larger discourses pervasive in society. Therefore, through identifying how perceptions on education and its systems have

been generated and reinforced in popular culture, this study will enable a counter force that avoids the current enclosure of the discourse on education within itself.

Methodology

In his study titled *The Effectiveness of Symbols*, Claude Lévi-Strauss examined a shaman's storytelling during a particularly difficult childbirth by Cuna Indians in Panama. The shaman narrated a long mythical story to a woman experiencing a difficult childbirth to cure the woman in pain. Yet the narrative does not appear anything related to the childbirth itself. Lévi-Strauss, through his textual analysis of this narration, discovers that the shaman was directing the woman to recognize close parallels between the characters, settings, and actions of the story and her physical and psychological difficulties of delivering a child. The shaman's narrative, Lévi-Strauss explicates, is a psychotherapeutic engagement for woman to identify her inexplicable obstacle and pain through symbolizing them. Through symbolizing her incomprehensible and disorderly obstacles, the shaman assisted the woman in placing her obstacle into her recognizable environment; so she could overcome a rational and comprehensible obstacle (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

From this shaman's use of storytelling in order to regain control in a disorderly environment, Lévi-Strauss identifies the power of symbolic representation to control human experiences and their environment. This "effectiveness of symbols," Lévi-Strauss stresses, is a key agent of the work of shamans and even psychotherapists. Undoubtedly, this effectiveness of symbols is also the central subject in any human communications that generate some impacts on people's behaviors similarly to what Freud introduces in psychoanalysis. Thus mass media can be represented as a psychotherapist or a shaman to its society, and studying the effectiveness of symbols in such media should present us with how we rationalize or comprehend our own environment.

Measuring the effectiveness of symbols, as Lévi-Strauss refers, largely depends on its audiences, contents, and forms. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton have generalized what the symbols transmitted through media do to its audiences into three functions: status-conferral function, the enforcement of social norms, and narcotizing dysfunction (Real, 1980). Lazarsfeld and Merton argue that the mass media confer status of issues through

establishing what should be an agenda to the society. Its selective presentation and emphasis also project what the social norm should be. Thus, transmitting certain symbols through the mass media would implicitly install impressions in audiences of what should be the social norms. Exposure to the deviations between an individual norm and what is perceived as the social norm would make constant dialogue in individuals to adjust their norms toward the social norm; in turn the norms represented in media get constantly reaffirmed implicitly. It is also important to note that the audiences tend to be passive consumers of symbolized messages instead of active producers of symbols because the population is constantly bombarded by the already-symbolized meanings transmitted through the mass media. Therefore, the mass media could transform the audiences into a large mass of apathetic population to the issues in a society.

This theoretical approach to effects of the mass media on audiences could be an effective tool when explicating how popular cultural representation of education have impacted in the mass population. However, it would not provide a sufficient picture as to why and how certain issues on education are symbolized and transmitted in popular culture. The contents and forms of media should also be integrated when analyzing the effectiveness of symbols in popular cultural representation of education. Analyzing what is being transmitted in the mass communication and how are indispensable when investigating the effectiveness of symbols.

Message theory of mass communications focuses on the symbols exchanged in the mass media. Message theory emphasizes content analysis (analyzing the frequency of certain symbolic messages), icon analysis (analyzing the particularity of symbols), and cultivation analysis (analyzing the values cultivated by media) to explore the effectiveness of symbols in mass communications (Cawalti, 1971; Fishwick, 1978; Holsti, 1969). Depending on what cultural, social, and/or other position one takes, the analysis could differ significantly because what constitutes a symbol or symbolic meaning is not defined equally to different in different environments. For this reason, this message theory generates a lot of analysis without having much coherence.

The above two major theoretical approaches to mass communications are both inadequate for analyzing the effectiveness of symbols in mass communications because of their incompetence to integrate audiences, contents, and forms of mass communications. It is critical to integrate those

three factors of mass communications; and thus an anthropological approach, like the one Clifford Geertz utilizes in his illustration of the Balinese cockfight, would be most useful for analyzing the effectiveness of symbols in the mass communications. Geertz offers a much larger framework for identifying the environmental significance when discussing the effectiveness of symbols represented in the cockfight (Geertz, 1973). He textualized in details the symbolic cultural practices when explicating Balinese cockfight, and his thick description set a perspective for his audiences. Geertz, therefore, enables his readers to simulate the culture's own interpretations of the contents—texts, by presenting the perspectives for his audiences. His thick description enables him not only to integrate the audiences, contents, and forms of human communications, but also to provide a paradigm in which the external audience can re-read the readings of the audiences in the social and cultural environments where cockfight took place.

The approach taken by Geertz requires much deeper examinations for the contextual environment on how the symbols come to be transmitted in media, the transmitted symbol and its meanings, as well as the examination on the audience behaviors to both the media and the transmitted symbols. Anthropological integration of cultural environment and the social institution is perhaps the most effective method to illustrate mass communications as a part of cultural exercises. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the impacts of popular culture on forming education and its systems, as well as popular cultural perspectives on them, by analyzing the symbols of education in the popular cultural contexts and mass communications.

Analysis

Since schools are a familiar setting for most of us living in a contemporary environment, there have been numerous films about schools and things happening in a school setting. It is of course beneficial to inquire into one of those contemporary films to expose how such films represent the discourse(s) of education in today's social, political and cultural settings.

It is, however, beneficial to select such films that would effectively demonstrate the pedagogical potential of exposing the discourse(s) of education that is available and/or circulated outside the field of education. Exposing such discourse(s) outside the in-house professional discourse of education would offer a critical lens that would allow educational researchers to carefully examine the presumptions and limitations

in the professional discourse of education. For this end, it is not necessary to select one of contemporary films to represent the discourse(s) of education in popular circle. Rather, it is important to select a film that would bring diverse messages and interpretations to challenge the singularity of the discourse of education.

Therefore, this study analyzed an old British film—*Educating Rita* to illustrate a classic yet persistent dilemma in the practice of teaching and learning. Produced in 1983, the film is shelved as a comedy and reviewed as a romance, but it gives insight about what learning really means, as well as its repercussions for at the both sides of educational practice. The heroine, Rita, hoped to “sing a better song”—that is to gain a command of language of social elite as a mean to attain class mobility—by attaining self-enlightenment. Hence, she resolved to seek it in education. Rita defined self-enlightenment as the ability to widen the possible choices in her life. However, it is quite ironic when considering she had to leave so many of her life, including her family and community, behind in her search for *enlightenment*. The film critically approaches to this irony through the eyes of both Rita and Frank, a tutor who had lost his desire for life as a poet, teacher, and a husband.

Like many other films, *Educating Rita* also portrays the power of education and the inflexibility of school systems. Other films like *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Les Heritiers* (2016) and others protest the traditional (which is often synonymously depicted as ridged) educational practice and the system of schoolings. In *Dead Poets Society*, this anti-traditional attitude toward school is represented by demonstrations like standing on the desks or aggressive teaching approaches like tearing pages out of books. Instead of attacking schools or educational systems *per se*, *Educating Rita* attempts to challenge our perception and approaches toward school and education by dispelling the presence of power in the education field as well as in the society in which education resides as a part.

The film is filled with dialogue between the voices of thesis and antithesis toward school and its system. Dialogue within, as well as between, Rita and Frank on schools, teacher-student relations, and other social aspects of life created conflicts throughout the film. By explicitly and implicitly dispelling the conflicts, both Rita and Frank transcended the norm, and constructed the synthesis in the end of film suggesting that the purpose of self-enlightenment or learning is to enrich or diversify the meaning of life itself; so individuals can make choices by themselves instead of having choices limited by expectations. Although such synthesis was

highly regarded only within the world of Rita and Frank—the private space isolated from the power that dictates system of school and society, they built their synthesis that the purpose of education is neither classifying values, nor enabling individuals to move from lesser-valued life to better one. The purpose is rather to diversify one's life through learning other lives. Education, therefore, works on both ends—teacher and student. The film illustrated promisingly in the end picturing education as a self-liberating activity and endeavor.

For this point, *Educating Rita* does not protest school itself, but it casts doubts on the assigned roles of educators, learners, non-learners, laborers, men, women, and ultimately the whole discourse—in a sense of Foucault—within a society. This aspect of the film reminds us of the approach taken by W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington's rhetoric of social justice at the end of the Reconstruction era to attain social equality in the newly reconstructed United States.

Washington foresaw a social justice by enabling blacks to gain material prosperity through education. His perspective is quite similar to why Rita sought her education in the first place—gaining access to better life through self-enlightenment. Initially, Rita denies her real name for she lacks confidence in her own individuality, and thus she desires to learn how she should *perform* to obtain her *education* so she could “discover me-self first” before fulfilling the social expectations to have a baby. She is willing to subordinate her beliefs and conform her behavior to what is acceptable and suitable among the society in which educated people “sing better songs”. She wants to free herself from her subordination to social expectations, but ironically, she is unaware of placing herself in another subordinate position with a set of different social expectations. This irony or dilemma closely resembles DuBois's argument, which is developed through John Jones experience written in “Of the Coming of John” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Through this story DuBois seems to castigate Washington's idea of compromise and subordination to the power of hegemony in order to obtain paternal support for black education. In DuBois's view, such a compromise would reinforce the subordination of the oppressed and loyalty to the oppressive power of hegemony. Social expectations limited choices for both Rita, blacks and those oppressed minorities. In other words, the desire to belong to a society puts a limitation to one's ability to choose freely so as not to exceed social expectations.

Under such conditions, seeking alternative choices

essentially means to turn one's back against social expectations. However, an individual who does seek alternative choices will inevitable to make choices that conform to another set of social expectations. This means one is still far from making independent choices since even this seeming protest or rebellion is carried out within the range of social territories. In other words, taking alternative choices prepared by different social expectations to protest other social expectations still limits individuals within the discourse of another society.

In the film, while asking Rita if she truly thinks she achieved a better life by becoming literate in the language of educated people, Frank says, “you did not learn a better song to sing, you just learned a different song.” This line suggests that individuals who subordinate themselves to others will not be able to attain true meaning in learning. In fact, DuBois (1903) pointed out the meaninglessness of learning under subjugation by stating that “self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilizing” (87).

However, it was Rita's spontaneity in learning, as well as Frank's appreciation of this spontaneity that eventually enabled her to transcend the limitations of social expectations and gain control of her choices. This spontaneity is different from the kind of spontaneity expected from individuals in a society. For example, teachers try to implement a *democratic* classroom by *allowing* students to make choices. However, such given choices are only an illusion of choice, therefore it only construct *illusion of a democratic classroom*. Of course, teachers believe they are *being democratic*; yet at the same time that democracy is *an illusion* because the teacher is still the one who dictates the choices for they remain supreme authority—a dictator—that determine what choices are acceptable or available to his/her students to choose. In short, even if teachers encourage spontaneity in students, this kind of spontaneity is forced and expected; therefore, it is not quite legitimate.

Rita's spontaneity however came from her own desire to learn and was strengthened by Frank's respect. Initially in Frank's office and later within her mind, Rita felt free from socially defined power relations existing not only between teacher and student, upper-class and working-class, intellectual wealth and poor, man and woman, as well as society and individuals.

By presenting various expectations of differing social systems, *Educating Rita* brilliantly illustrates the difficulties of learning, while also showing Rita's joy in

acquiring knowledge and constructing a solid identity that allows her to design the choices in her life. The film also warns the audience of the vulnerable nature of knowledge, which can be shaped in relation to social expectations and power, thereby narrowing an individual's choice or creating illusion of choice.

The film's illustration of the discourse of power makes us realize that *education is a dangerous institution* with the authority to mold people in certain ways. Education has the power to make people literate in the language of power, which unveils where individuals are located in a society and how they relate to the power that dictates the social system. However, those who have power must be very careful in exercising it and need to constantly evaluate the outcome of exercising it. Those with power in our social system can shape other's thinking and behavior to a follow an *expected* manner in the name of education providing illusion of choices.

When teaching, both in schools and in teacher preparation courses, we need to be very cautious in establishing the purpose of education by evaluating whether it is the social purpose that dictates one's action in the society or it is one's purpose that dictates one's actions in a society. By doing so, we can bring back learning to individuals, instead of limiting individuals to a society's expectations generated outside individual learners.

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