

Using Films in the University Classroom

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Keywords: film education, university, pedagogical material, testimony

I love films and watch them whenever I can. In this paper, I discuss seven films which I have used in three art education courses. As a means to stimulate creative and analytical thinking, these film-intensive courses help prospective teachers address different classroom situations: a graduate-level course dealing with the ways in which teachers are presented in both documentary and fictional movies; an undergraduate course on the way in which art and artists are presented in film and video; and a graduate seminar that examines a variety of critical issues in art education. In what follows, I offer extended discussions and commentaries on seven of the many films that I screened, and include a collection of commentaries, notes and classroom handouts related to the films. For context, I briefly discuss some of the eclectic theoretical frameworks within which I chose to frame these films.

Background

Starting early in my teaching career, I used films often in the classroom with primary students, undergraduate and graduate students. At the primary level, film helped students grasp intuitively similarities across genres. In seminars intended for teacher interns, we approach films by engaging primarily with their content and themes as they relate to teaching. In my classes, films are used to flesh out ideas and to consider claims made about art and the aesthetic.

When I worked as an elementary-level art teacher in Boston, my aim was to motivate students to see similarities and make connections of genre across different time periods. I used a clip from *Alexander Nevsky* (Sergei Eisenstein & Dmitri Vasilyev, 1938) to motivate a fourth-grade papier-mâché class by showing the classic scene of the “Battle on the Ice” and the ominous advance of the Teutonic knights, with its memorable score by Prokofiev. The clip,

despite being in black and white, held the children's attention. This was preparatory to our recreating the scene with miniature papier-mâché knights on horseback on the vast expanse of the school parking lot! [Figure 1] This was in late 1979 and the children insisted that this was a scene copied from *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977). I explained that they correctly identified that the genre of the two films was identical but that the chronology was reversed, and that in fact, Lucas might well have been inspired by Eisenstein's epic drama.

The films I show to graduates, teacher interns and undergraduates in art education fulfil three main purposes: 1) As texts to be analyzed and critiqued in order to sharpen students' analytical and rhetorical skills. 2) As a way of examining typical classroom situations and encouraging students—especially those who want to be teachers—to think about issues and situations that are typically encountered in school. 3) As a way of promoting discussions among students of the enduring broader social issues that impact life in art classrooms.



Figure 1. Teutonic knights created by students in Grade 4, inspired by Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). (Photo: David Pariser, 1979).

With a background in literature and education/cognitive psychology, I approach film much as I would a written text: in my art education classes, I am primarily interested in the narrative and the light that the film sheds on particular issues and topics. I learned my approach to literature using the “New Criticism,” a method I use as a guideline for my students to encourage them to examine the film initially with few preconceptions and without any intensive study of the critical literature. Once students have grappled with the film in this way, they can then choose to become acquainted with the critical literature. We deal very lightly—if at all—with cinematic tropes and approaches, we do not use the specialized language of film criticism, and we do not delve much into film theory.

Films about Teachers and Schooling—Documentary and Fictional

When I work with students who are in training to be teachers, my intention is to have them look critically at the business of teaching and education. For these purposes, the films I choose are either documentaries, such as the two *High School* films by Frederick Wiseman (1968, 1994); fictionalized accounts, such as *Entre les murs* (*The Class*, Laurent Cantet, 2008); or complete fictions, such as the fourth season (2006) of the HBO TV series *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008). Screening these films is a way of getting students to observe teachers at work, to examine the dynamics of the classroom and to highlight the challenges and triumphs of teaching. Much like the semi-fictional literature on teaching, these films bring the world of the classroom artfully to life. The author Frank McCourt, for example, has created a masterful semi-fictional representation of his own experience of 30 years as a New York City teacher.¹ I use McCourt as a textbook with these same teacher interns for the same reason that I use the films: because such work presents the experience of teaching in a vivid and credible way, thereby engaging my students who are about to encounter similar situations.²

In one of the special topics courses that I offered, we examined the ways in which teachers have been portrayed in some popular films. Such portrayals have a powerful effect on how teachers see themselves and how the public sees them. For this graduate course we used Bulman’s book *Hollywood Goes to High School* (2005) as a primary reference.³ Bulman presents a theoretical framework for examining films about schools and teachers. Using

sociological theory from sources such as Bellah *et al.*, Bulman identifies three high school movie settings and genres, each one identifying a distinctive variation on the theme of individualism: 1) gritty inner-city schools, 2) suburban high schools, and 3) elite private schools.⁴

In films that take place in urban high schools, “the dominant theme is utilitarian individualism.”⁵ This strain of utilitarianism “celebrates hard work, materialism, and individual self-sufficiency.”⁶ In films set in this social milieu, the middle-class teacher-hero tries to instill the values of utilitarian individualism in their students, often via the teaching equivalent of “the stations of the cross,” which will be discussed below.

However, in the suburban school films, “the dominant theme is not utilitarian individualism but expressive individualism.”⁷ Thus, the goal for teachers is to help suburban adolescents discover their authentic identity and achieve self-expression. Teachers in these settings sometimes encourage their students to disdain and belittle their taken-for-granted middle-class privilege.

According to Bulman, films set in the private schools explore both themes of expressive and utilitarian individualism. In such films, the goal is often to present working-class and middle-class students or teachers in strong contrast to the moral and emotional bankruptcy of the wealthy privileged. These parents wish to have their children trained to take their so-called rightful place in the upper echelons of society.

Bulman suggests that each of the ways in which films present the three tiers of the educational establishment can be understood as a reflection of middle-class North American values. That is, the films assume a middle-class perspective on the high school experience. This was the sociological framework within which we considered mainstream films about teaching.

Bulman notes that very little work has been done on the ways in which Hollywood films about school are actually received by their audiences, especially youth. Thus, for one of my assignments in the seminar I proposed that students show a film about education/school to high school students. What sense would such students make of this sort of film? Do they “get” Hollywood’s message? What sorts of other interpretations arise from the screening? What sense do teachers themselves make of the film? Two students took up this challenge and showed the film *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980) to secondary students who had a concentration in dance. In a report on their

project titled *Fame: Perception de l'école* par des élèves du secondaire, Martin and Duguay examined the reactions of the students to the film.⁸ Of special interest were the ways in which the students identified with the pupils in the fictional arts high school. They note:

Ceci s'accorde encore une fois avec la vision de Bulman: «Hollywood films tend to privilege the middle-class experience by making the protagonists of films representatives of the middle-class.»⁹ Doris est intelligente, persévérante et sa destinée est la seule qui soit réellement positive dans le film. Elle incarne parfaitement l'héroïne du «suburban high school»: «The hero is [...] usually a student who is able to overcome the conformity of teen society or the authoritarianism of adult society.»¹⁰ Dans une scène avec sa mère, Doris lui annonce son intention de changer de nom et ajoute: «I'm growing up [...]. I'm becoming an actress.»¹¹

Thus the graduate students made good use of Bulman's analysis and corroborated one of his claims with some empirical data from interacting with a group of high school pupils. The two graduate students realized the potential of films to animate pupils' reactions and to increase their capacity to reflect critically on their experience of high school versus the way that it is presented in the movies.

***High School* (Frederick Wiseman, 1968)**

I use Frederick Wiseman's two films (*High School*, 1968, and *High School II*, 1994) because they provide remarkable documentation of the American high school over a period of two and a half decades.

In *High School*, Wiseman takes a clearly political position, offering a critique of the power and politics that are part of the schooling system. Wiseman notes the prevalence of authoritarianism in the educational system, set as it is, against the backdrop of the ongoing Vietnam War. The film culminates in a staff assembly in honour of a student who died in Vietnam. It is hard to avoid the point that Wiseman is making, namely that the authoritarian aspects of the high school make military enlistment a natural continuation of many students' high school careers.

A particularly telling scene in Wiseman's first *High School* film shows the interaction between a crew-cut, muscular vice principal who is visited

by several young men who have been sent to him for disciplinary action. One of Wiseman's strengths is the success with which the filmmakers are near invisible and the drama unrolls as though neither party is aware of the camera. The vice principal's mission is to enforce discipline, and above all, to socialize young men to behave "as men." This is evident in the way in which he treats two very different specimens of adolescent manhood: one young man is polite to the point of unctuousness and complains in a whiny manner about the way he has been treated by his teacher for a squabble at the blackboard. The vice principal advises the boy to "take it like a man," that is, to accept what he considers unfair treatment and to respect the teacher's authority and to take his punishment. The boy agrees to do this, but adds *sotto voce* "under protest." However, when another youth enters the office, the dynamic changes abruptly. This youth looks tough (scarred face and a burly physique) and has been sent down due to a physical altercation with another student. When this "troublemaker" attempts to give his side of the story, prefacing his remarks with "Sir, let me explain," the vice principal snarls back, "Don't you 'Sir' me!", taking the youth's attempt at politeness as a devious ruse. The interview terminates with the young man's suspension from school.

Wiseman has managed to capture the dramatic differences in treatment based on how these two young men "perform" their gender roles. The polite, somewhat whiny and well-spoken young man is counseled to "be a man" and encounters no aggression from the vice principal, just condescension. The traditionally male "troublemaker" is treated as an aggressive rival to the authority figure and given short shrift. But there is at least no question that the tough kid "is a man."

In this scene and others, Wiseman highlights one of the key dynamics of the 1968 *High School*: the administration of unreflective authority and its consequences as part of the education process. We have already noted the telling way that *High School* ends, with a school assembly in honour of an academically undistinguished young graduate who has recently died in Vietnam. With obvious emotion, the young man's teacher reads a letter he sent her before leaving on a dangerous mission. It includes the words "I am just a body doing a job." The teacher reads these words without much awareness of their pathos, that the young man accepts his purely instrumental utility. And she adds with pride after reading his final note, "We do a good job

here at Northwest High School.” An example of chilling blindness to the end results of authoritarianism.

I note that in this film Wiseman provides at least one counter to the pervasive authoritarian atmosphere. One young language arts teacher encourages her students to study the words and music of Simon and Garfunkel. She distributes the words to the song *The Sounds of Silence* (1964) and then plays the music. She understands that the way to reach her students is via the products of contemporary popular culture. This is a teaching approach that is as applicable today as it was then. The scenes in her classroom show most of the students apparently attending to the words and music she is playing for them on a large reel-to-reel tape deck. This scene stands in marked contrast to another attempt in another classroom to bring literature to the students: a weary and uninspired English teacher gives a dreary recitation of Ernest Thayer’s famous baseball poem *Casey at the Bat* (1888). The camera scans the room full of students enduring the recitation by sleeping, playing with pens and generally passing the time without a thought for the “poetry” that is being offered. One feels sympathy for the teacher attempting to inspire interest in literature but whose delivery fails to reach her audience.

***High School II* (Frederick Wiseman, 1994)**

In *High School II*, Wiseman offers a far more positive view of that institution. He documents the day-to-day life in the progressive Central Park East Secondary School in New York. A MacArthur Fellow, educator Deborah Meier is the principal and she heads a team of dedicated middle-class teachers committed to teaching students to think critically and in depth. As we watch the film, we are aware that the documentary is shot at the same time as the aftermath of Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. Thus, as with *High School*, there is a larger social drama that resonates within the school.

Wiseman clearly recognized the educational potential of his second *High School* film and collaborated on the publication of a teachers’ *Film Study Guide to High School II*.¹² The study guide gives teachers—and teacher interns—a chance to look at the film in depth. In seven chapters, the *Guide* offers information about, and ways of interrogating the film. The guide not only covers the making of the film, but also introduces Wiseman and his work and the school’s founder, Deborah Meier. One section offers workshops based on issues raised by the film: “Assessing Student Achievement”;

“Community as a Critical Component in School life”; “Visiting Central Park East Secondary School”; “Habits of Mind and Individual Expression”; and “Considering Change for Your School”.¹³

Whereas Wiseman’s documentary portrays the 1968 high school mostly as a machine for grinding out unthinking conformists—and cannon fodder—his look at the Central Park East High School in New York is an approving portrait of a secondary institution that works successfully with mainly Latino and African American students. At the time the film was made, this school had a remarkably high rate of college acceptance, testimony to the effectiveness of the school’s philosophy of education. Meier wrote about these students and others in *The Power of Their Ideas. Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*, which we examined in class.¹⁴ Meier’s educational goal was to create responsible, informed citizens and people whom she would want as neighbours. To this end, the high school enshrines what are referred to as the “Habits of Mind.” Meier describes them in this way:

We never quite write them out in the exact same way and over the years we have realized that they are constantly evolving in their meaning. They are the question of evidence, or, “How do we know what we know?”; the question of viewpoint, in all its multiplicity, or “Who’s speaking?”; the search for connections and patterns, or “What causes what?”; supposition, or “How might things have been different?”; and finally, why any of it matters, or “Who cares?”¹⁵

For a convincing demonstration of how these habits of mind are applied in the classroom, Wiseman documents a highly engaging and authentic classroom debate on the topic of immigration policy. Quite apart from the striking contemporary relevance of the debate, I have referred student teachers to this debate as an illustration of a teacher’s mastery of classroom skills. The teacher who moderates the debate is a model facilitator, by turns a parliamentarian, coach and devil’s advocate. And throughout, he challenges the students to apply the school’s habits of mind, debate being a natural arena for such an exercise. Here, Wiseman’s film functions as a reliable educational document and my students attend to it without concern for the cinematic art form, although Wiseman does far more than just allowing his camera to

roll. In an interview, he notes that editing the film is an arduous task since he shoots way more footage than he will need.

Entre les murs (The Class, Laurent Cantet, 2008)

This film, based on a book written by François Bégaudeau about his experiences as a high school teacher in central Paris, won the Palme d'or at Cannes 2008.¹⁶ I have screened the film for my teacher interns and graduate students. In the film, Bégaudeau plays the teacher, with considerable success. This film, like *High School II*, has a study guide intended to engage viewers with the film's main themes and to improve non-francophones' language proficiency. The roles of students are played by actual multicultural high school students from the Paris suburbs. The presence of these students lends the film strength and authenticity.

This film is very useful for student teachers working through their high school internship. It touches on issues of control, power and, most of all, issues related to multiculturalism as these students represent a broad spectrum of cultural backgrounds. The film is particularly useful in offering cringeworthy moments when the teacher makes all manner of errors and strategic mistakes—the kind that all teachers and especially neophytes are likely to commit. Thus, we see the generally self-controlled teacher inadvertently alienate a student with whom he has had a good relationship up to that point. The teacher does not know how to handle this student's flat refusal to read aloud from a text that the class is using. The teacher loses face as he attempts fruitlessly to force the girl to read aloud. A more seasoned teacher would have had the sense to let the insolent behaviour go, move on and not humiliate the student in front of her peers.

The film deals with the dynamics of the class and the brewing resentments of immigrant students who do not identify as “culturally French.” In one case, an African student is continuously difficult in class. After he inadvertently injures another student, he is sent back to his uncle in Senegal, an outcome that the teacher bitterly regrets. Precisely because these are carefully staged dramatic encounters, with students who have “lived the life,” the lessons for my teacher interns are appreciated. It is easy to underline the errors committed and to identify the sorts of situations to avoid, although it is far easier to do so when watching a film than in real life. Even though the film is set in Paris, there are issues that resonate strongly with current issues here in

Quebec, where the French language is a very sensitive topic and the integration of immigrants is a delicate and controversial issue.

***A Touch of Greatness. A Great American Teacher and the Lives He Influenced* (Leslie Sullivan, 2005)**

I have used this film with undergraduate teacher interns to show the immense impact that good teachers can have on the lives of their students. *A Touch of Greatness* documents the impact of elementary school teacher Albert Cullum. He taught in a Connecticut elementary school during the 1960s and achieved huge success in reaching his students. His impact was so great that some 40 years later, 30 of his ex-students returned to the same grade school to celebrate his life. The film documents this reunion and includes interviews with several of Callum's students. It also contains clips from the 16mm movies that Callum made of his young students putting on classical theatre pieces, from *Antigone* (Sophocles) and *Julius Caesar* (Shakespeare) to *Saint Joan* (George Bernard Shaw). Callum did not last long as a vivacious and imaginative elementary teacher. His flair for drama and his dedication to the children he served did not make him popular among many of the other elementary school teachers who may have resented his success and his unorthodox methods in achieving popularity among his students. Callum exemplifies the brilliance of an inspiring teacher. (In later life he goes on to a university where he trains teachers, an experience that he finds disheartening, so the film ends on a sad note.)

***The Wire* (Season 4, David Simon, 2006)**

One more source of brilliant, contextualized, thought-provoking dramatization of high school life is the widely acclaimed HBO television series, *The Wire* (season 4). James Trier says of this series: "Season 4 holds great pedagogical potential for academics in education."¹⁷

Trier has published extensively on the presentation of teachers in film and television, and cites Hynes, who has identified "the stations of the cross" for the standard Hollywood portrayal of the neophyte teacher.¹⁸ The standard sequence is as follows:

- 1) The baptism of fire: the initial and terrible first class.
- 2) The totally demoralizing staff meeting where the seasoned teachers all complain about the useless administration and the difficult students.

- 3) The seasoned teachers dismiss the idealism of the new teacher, much to his or her distress.
- 4) A violent confrontation in the new teacher's class when poor management allows things to get out of control. In some Hollywood versions the teacher himself gets physical and demonstrates his dominance, e.g., *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955).
- 5) The melodramatic "redemption" scene: the new teacher is recognized by his or her students as an empathetic hero and is accepted by the class.

In spite of the fact that *The Wire* (season 4) contains some of these stock situations, the new teacher Pryzbylewski (Prez) is no stock "teacher-hero." We understand from watching the previous seasons of *The Wire* that Pryzbylewski has taken up teaching as a way of expiating his sins as a policeman, for he has made some serious mistakes. Much like Bégaudeau in *Entre les murs*, Pryzbylewski struggles with discipline and classroom management in what is for him, as a Polish American, a thoroughly unfamiliar cultural context, that is, inner-city Baltimore.

This school is one where a significant number of the students know that formal education has nothing to offer them and that their future lies on the street corners of their neighbourhood, selling drugs to addicts. This season of *The Wire* is powerful because we are given a comprehensive vision of the city and all of the forces that are brought to bear on the educational system: political, cultural, and economic. Thus, we see very clearly how the brightest and most able students, given the wrong circumstances (e.g., dysfunctional family) can end up using their intelligence and loyalty to serve a drug boss rather than achieving any sort of legitimate success. Prez knows this and struggles mightily to redirect his students. However, there is no clear evidence at the close of the season that he has succeeded in this effort. This grim conclusion strikes an important and realistic note, which is very useful for teacher interns and which is at variance with the typically "feel good" Hollywood endings to teacher sagas.

As Trier points out, this season of *The Wire* touches on many important topics related to education regardless of where it is practised. Among them are using one's knowledge of student culture to help with learning, dealing with moral dilemmas, and addressing issues around standardized testing. We see how the retired Police Captain "Bunny" Colvin communicates with the

unruly kids who are headed for a life on the corners selling drugs. Colvin asks the students a question that totally engages them. He asks them what makes a good “corner boy?” The responses he gets are thoughtful and emphasize traits that are valued in non-criminal endeavors as well, i.e., loyalty, courage, and the capacity to think on one’s feet. The show also addresses moral dilemmas, asking if a teacher is justified in moving difficult, disruptive students out of the “regular” classroom so that the other students can work in a calm atmosphere. The issue of standardized testing has the school insisting that teachers teach to the test with the only concern being keeping scores high. Prez is appalled at this fraudulent approach and loudly declares that he will not play this game. Seasoned teachers advise him to engage in this sort of rebellion in a more circumspect way.

Lastly, there is the thankless and difficult task of doing educational research in the schools in order to improve educational outcomes for schools serving disadvantaged communities. (As we have seen, Wiseman, in *High School II*, offers some insights on this huge question.) Educational research *in situ* is a thematic thread that runs through the fourth season. Dr. Parenti is a local academic who receives a grant to help with identifying and socializing the children who quit school and who enter the drug subculture. Parenti is initially greeted as naïve and with thinly disguised contempt by teachers and administrators. But Parenti is aided by his informant, and minder, Police Captain Colvin who knows the neighbourhood well, and who has a powerful grasp of how things work. Colvin convinces Parenti and the school personnel to that the graduating students are already lost causes and that it would be more effective to focus on the 7th- and 8th-graders who are not yet frozen into the patterns of a “corner boy in waiting.”

My seminar students were encouraged to study the entire fourth season of this series and to extract from it lessons and observations that would serve them well when they entered their own student teaching placements. The key take-away from this season of *The Wire* is that teachers need to imagine the out-of-school lives of their students because it is those experiences that the students bring with them.

How Art and Artists Are Presented in Film

In undergraduate and graduate classes, I have presented numerous films on the way art and artists are presented in films. The choices are many. In

one course, *Art and Artists. Understanding and Representing the Lives of Creative People*, we screened eight films: *Amadeus* (Miloš Forman, 1984), *Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Rublyov, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1969), *Babette's Feast* (*Babettes Gæstebud/Le festin de Babette*, Gabriel Axel, 1987), *Frida Kahlo* (Julie Taymor, 2002), *King of Masks* (*Biàn Liǎn*, Wu Tien-Ming, 1996), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Héctor Babenko, 1985), *Pollock* (Ed Harris, 2000), and *Vincent and Theo* (Robert Altman, 1990).

***Amadeus* (Miloš Forman, 1984)**

Amadeus offers rich material for discussions. Two perennial topics among many suggest themselves: the nature and recognition of artistic creativity and the relationship of the artist's character to the artwork itself.

Freudian Notions of Artistic Creativity

Like a series of nested boxes, the film *Amadeus* is based on a play by Peter Shaffer about Mozart and Salieri (*Amadeus*, Peter Shaffer, 1979). Thus, the "true" facts about Mozart and Salieri are buried beneath two levels of artistic construction. When we looked at the film in the course, I took Forman as the key figure. He chose Salieri as the narrator. However, it is Forman/Shaffer who pull the rhetorical strings. And Forman/Shaffer owe a lot to Freud and to a romantic conception of the artist as possessed by his genius and as someone who comes by his creativity with little effort or training.

Forman/Shaffer—again via Salieri—present Mozart as the model of a creative person who is effortlessly in touch with his "primary process thinking." This characterization owes much to a Freudian model of art and creativity: throughout the movie we see that Mozart is impulsive and driven by very basic drives, such as the quest for food, sex, and other hardly controlled infantile impulses. (There may be a little truth to this, as Mozart's many letters still exist and they do contain occasional scatological and bawdy comments, so Forman/Shaffer were not inventing Mozart's dirty mouth out of mere sensationalism.) The suggestion is that these same powerful drives also fuel his creativity. However, according to Freud, the artist is the one who must channel this asocial and primitive energy into the activity of making art. Freud calls this "sublimation" and it comes in many different forms.¹⁹ Is sublimation what makes Mozart tick? Is sublimation what makes Salieri tick? Mozart is not in the least repressed. Yet he is a prodigious creator. Salieri

curbs his carnal instincts up until the point where he feels that God is mocking him, but his creations are never at Mozart's level. In relation to the issue of sublimation and the Freudian explanation for creative activity, and artistic symbolism, see Arnheim's essay²⁰ and Gombrich's essay²¹ on art history and psychoanalysis. Arnheim is very critical of Freudian "reductionism" whereas Gombrich is much more positive about the utility of psychoanalysis in helping us to understand art.

Even though classical Freudian approaches to textual exegesis are currently considered quaint, hopelessly gendered and out of fashion, the film was made at a time when Freudian notions still had currency with Forman. These notions are easily identified in the film. For example, we are familiar enough with Freud to recognize the psychological importance of both composers' shared difficulties with their respective fathers. This issue is central to the artists characters. (The ever-useful "Oedipus complex" is invoked.) The two men are portrayed as would-be parricides. That is, Salieri rejoices at his father's death, and perhaps develops some guilt over this. Mozart, on the other hand, is shown as fantasizing and immortalizing the death and revenge of Leopold, to the extent that he identifies the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* as Leopold Mozart, his demanding and dour father. This, at least, is how Salieri sees it. In fact, Salieri exploits Mozart's troubled relationship with Leopold by impersonating Leopold and commissioning a funeral Mass.

Forman/Shaffer present a standard notion of the source of artists' ideas and how they make them powerful by universalizing them. Forman, via Salieri, observes how Mozart takes aspects of everyday life and finds in these ordinary moments something transcendent, something that speaks to the human condition. Thus, Mozart transforms his oppressive father into the larger-than life Commendatore (Don Giovanni), an avenging figure calling on the libertine son to atone for his deeds. Salieri sees how Mozart turns his shrewish landlady into another operatic figure, the evil Queen of the Night (*The Magic Flute*, Mozart, 1791). Thus, art deals with transcendent issues—such as crime and punishment, family distress, love and death—often by presenting a familiar moment, setting or confrontation and then elevating this moment, through aestheticizing it and through conventions of representation, into something that speaks more generally of a universal plight.

The Systems Theory of Artistic Creativity

In the course, I introduced an alternative to Freudian notions of creativity in proposing Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's "systems theory of creativity."²² This is a model for understanding how significant creative work is first recognized and then, in some cases, becomes dominant. In discussing the origins of his systems approach, Csíkszentmihályi describes the impetus for thinking about how great artists or scientists are recognized. Csíkszentmihályi wondered how it was that a place such as fifteenth-century Florence could produce such a surfeit of brilliant and talented artists. Csíkszentmihályi rejected the notion that there had been a freakish outpouring of artistic talent in Florence at that time. He suggested a more parsimonious explanation. First, let's assume that the ratio of artistically talented people to non-artists is always and everywhere roughly the same in any given population. The reason, then, for the sudden flowering of artistic talent must be accounted for by the social institutions in the given setting. Florence was in competition with other city states and was determined to distinguish itself via the arts. The city fathers ensured social support for artists and craftsmen. There was a decision to cultivate artists rather than lawyers. Thus, the seeds of artistic greatness fell on prepared fertile ground. According to Csíkszentmihályi's model, all recognized art emerges at the intersection of three worlds: the world of the individual; the world of the domain, which is the world of artistic skills, knowledge, practice and discipline; and the social world to which Csíkszentmihályi refers as "the field," meaning the social institutions (museums galleries, tutors, critics, etc.) that support, judge and promote those individuals worthy of the honorific term, i.e., artists. This, then, is a largely "constructivist" model to explain the emergence of significant artists. The individual is an important part of the mix but is not the sole determinant. It is not enough for an artist to have "talent" or facility for without the ratification of arts institutions and artistic gatekeepers, such as critics, journalists and patrons, the artist will languish for lack of support.

In *Amadeus* we find an interesting though completely unintended counter-example to Csíkszentmihályi's ideas about the impact of "the field." Whereas Csíkszentmihályi describes the field as a benign or perhaps neutral force that ratifies the special gifts of the artist, he doesn't discuss the possibility that the social world may actively suppress the creative work of an individual. Yet this is exactly the situation described in *Amadeus*. Salieri is portrayed as a toxic member of the musical field who for personal reasons wants to destroy

Mozart. As a member of the field, Salieri recognizes Mozart's genius but the field in this case does not ratify stellar creative work; it stifles it. The idiot emperor, who by virtue of his high social position is the ultimate arbiter of musical worth, agrees with Salieri and the other court toadies, that Mozart's work is not of special value. Forman/Shaffer present the Viennese musical field as a swamp of sycophants and treachery, of petty and fearful men who wish to please the emperor and protect their own jobs. Genius like Mozart's is seen as a threat to their interests. Thus, far from supporting Mozart as a new star in the musical sky, they all work together to stifle him.

However, other scholars suggest that not all aspects of successful art can be understood largely as the workings of "the field." Pinker in *The Blank Slate*²³ and Dutton in *The Art Instinct*²⁴ both argue that the intrinsic properties of works of art can account for their success. These two theoreticians downplay the role of "the field" and emphasize the properties that artworks have in common and that appeal to a wide audience.

The Relationship Between Art, Morality and the Character of the Artist

Can great art be based on morally flawed or politically repugnant positions?²⁵ In order to make a great work of art does the artist have to be a moral person? This question is the driving force behind the wretched Salieri's hatred of Mozart. Salieri asks how it can be that this repulsive, gibbering homunculus is the repository for such undisputed genius? How can God allow such a travesty? This is Salieri's initial response to Mozart. As the film develops, Salieri's puzzlement and frustration turn into hatred: hatred against "the beast" and hatred for the Divine Power that has seen fit to bless this unworthy creature with such a gift when he, Salieri, has—up to that point—led an unblemished life and expects a reward for his pious moral behaviour.

More generally, the moral qualities of artists, their character and behaviour are frequent topics of discussion and controversy. Picasso's misogyny, Dostoevsky and Dickens' antisemitism, Francis Bacon's violent proclivities, and Leni Riefenstahl's overt sympathies for the Nazis²⁶ are all examples of artists whose work is recognized as exceptionally brilliant, even though their personal failings make the artists themselves morally unpalatable. This debate is perennial and we engaged with it in discussing Salieri's difficulties squaring Mozart's musical genius with his notable character flaws, at least to judge by the portrait drawn by Tom Hulce and as directed by Forman.

***The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006):
The Transformative Power of Art?**

I have used *The Lives of Others* for ten years in a graduate seminar titled *Critical Issues in Art Education*. It has, without fail, elicited divergent and thoughtful responses from students. This sort of intense engagement by students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (art education, studio, art history) indicates the film's appeal and the way in which it touches on a rich field of topics.

The film raises questions that have a direct bearing on issues central to the seminar. We deal with the questions of how the arts intersect with politics: do the arts, in fact have an effect on the societies where they are produced? This is a particularly topical question when so much contemporary artistic practice is predicated on the political impact of the arts. The film also provokes questions such as what, in Schama's words, is the "power of art?"²⁷ Can the arts carry moral messages? Do the arts have a defined and universal constitution, or are the arts just arbitrarily socially constructed entities, with no essential/universal characteristics? What, in general, is the nature and function of the aesthetic? We address many aspects of these issues, with readings from "essentialist" psychologist Pinker,²⁸ from anthropologists such as Dutton,²⁹ and from postmodernists who insist on the self-serving artificiality of concepts such as "the aesthetic"³⁰ and, by extension, art in general.

The film is set in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) just prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall and tells the story of a state security agent who is a member of the Stasi (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, German for "Ministry for State Security"). Gerd Wiesler is assigned to spy on a privileged artistic couple, Georg Dreyman, a playwright, and Christa-Maria Sieland, his lover and a very successful actress. These two artists are the pride of the East German cultural establishment as their talents are recognized in the West as well as the East. Bruno Hempf, Minister of Culture, and his sycophantic side-kick, Grubitz, decide that these two beautiful people are politically compromised and need to be surveilled for signs of disloyalty. The person chosen to implement the surveillance is Wiesler, who sets up his spy equipment and bugging devices in Dreyman's flat. Initially, Wiesler is shown as a "true believer" devoted to maintaining and protecting the socialist state. We see that he can be ruthless in executing his duties as an interrogator. However, once Wiesler discovers that the surveillance operation is actually

a way of forcing Sieland to become Hempf's mistress, Wiesler's allegiance to the GDR and his superiors begins to waver. In effect, Wiesler becomes the couple's secret champion and protector. While on duty, Wiesler learns about and covers up the fact that Dreyman is producing a highly critical article on the suicide rates in the GDR. Eventually Dreyman's article is published in a large, well known West German newspaper and its appearance precipitates a tragic denouement.

Of significance for the film's argument and for this seminar is that, immersed in the couple's lives, Wiesler is exposed for the first time to the realm of the aesthetic in literature and music. Von Donnersmarck has stated that the germ for this film came to him while thinking about Lenin's quote that he should forego listening to Beethoven's *Appassionato*, as doing so makes him wish to caress people's heads rather than break them in service to the Revolution. Von Donnersmarck wanted to argue that art (in this case, music) could have a powerful humanizing effect on a devout ideologue such as Lenin or, in this case, the Stasi Wiesler. And in fact, the turning point for this drama is the moment when Wiesler, via his listening devices, hears Dreyman play *Sonata for a Good Man* for Sieland. The score is a gift from their friend, the black-listed director Jerska, who has just committed suicide. We see that Wiesler is deeply moved for he sheds tears. Dreyman unknowingly underlines the importance of this moment, when he says, "Can anyone who has heard this music, I mean *really heard it*, be a bad man?" Clearly, Wiesler does hear the music and it awakens his soul.

The film was von Donnersmarck's first major work and was met with critical acclaim. While it won an Academy Award, it also generated significant controversy. In his chapter on *The Lives of Others*, Evans³¹ cites Garton Ash³² on what he refers to as "Germany's festering half rhyme—Nazi/Stasi." The film has been criticized for its historical inaccuracies, i.e., a Stasi agent would not likely have become Dreyman and Sieland's protector. It has also been criticized for sentimentalizing life under the GDR, a species of nostalgia called "Ostalgie" in German that suggests that life in the GDR was not all that bad. But consider the countless examples provided by von Donnersmarck of the shadows that hovered over even the most banal actions of ordinary people. The director creates and sustains an atmosphere of menace from the start. He does so in ingenious ways, using everyday incidents in the film that are overlaid here with heavy menace: 1) A student makes an innocent, but

critical comment in class about Stasi interrogation methods. 2) A neighbour helps to knot Dreyman's tie and swears to keep that a secret, all within earshot of a surveillance bug that the neighbour knows is there. 3) The same neighbour accepts flowers from the Stasi as recognition of the fact that the Stasi knows that they are compromised. 4) A Stasi trainee tells a joke in the supposedly safe space of the cafeteria and then finds that space violated by his superiors. 5) Wiesler asks a little boy the name of his soccer ball.

In each case, these are simple and nominally innocent interactions but in the context of hyper-vigilant surveillance and concern with the "enemies of the state," we in the audience begin to appreciate the psychological (and physical) danger in which these people live. The lurking state apparatus is best represented by the attic surveillance equipment where Wiesler sits and spies on Dreyman and Sieland. We, the audience, know that Wiesler is there but the couple does not. Paradoxically, Wiesler's assiduous surveillance ultimately becomes the channel by which he is exposed to the aesthetic and he becomes actively involved in their lives.

Two of the many debatable points raised by this film relate to its cinematic and dramatic references. One is its indebtedness to Brecht, and the other is its indebtedness to classic Hollywood films. Both Kolb³³ and Sternlieb³⁴ point out that the figure of Brecht is an important dramatic presence. He was nothing if not a highly political artist— one whose influence remains to this day—and one associated with communism and the Soviets. He was also a prickly and unruly personality, much like Jerska in *Lives*, who did not toe the Party line in all respects. One of Brecht's signature dramatic effects is "Verfremdung" or the alienation effect. He insisted on this in theatre. That is, Brecht wanted to disrupt the "hocus pocus" of illusion and to rub the audience's noses firmly in the fact that theatre is just artifice. According to him, the audience must be rudely and frequently acquainted with the artificiality of theatrical performance in the interests of awakening them to action. This is the very opposite of what von Donnersmarck offers his audience and some critics, such as Kolb, make this very point. Von Donnersmarck's critics accuse him of trying to have it both ways: he offers an homage to Brecht (via Jerska) but does not adopt the dramatic approach required by Brecht for effective drama, namely alienating the audience.

Another related issue that has been explored in critical writings on *Lives* is the way that von Donnersmarck is able to engage in the very un-Brechtian

seduction of his audience. The narrative is smooth and silent and it does not draw attention to itself. According to Sternlieb, the director uses numerous classic Hollywood melodramatic devices and ruses to engage the viewer totally in the story.³⁵ One key feature of this genre is the presence of a simplified opposition between moral absolutes personified in broadly drawn characters, i.e., Hempf and Grubitz, both of whom are ruthless career civil servants whose lack of moral insight and empathy is contrasted with Wiesler's awakened humanity and Dreyman's empathic nature. Sternlieb speculates that as this film was made just after von Donnersmarck completed film school, where he had studied American cinema, it is only natural that he would make numerous references to the films that he had just studied and use many of its devices. Sternlieb says that von Donnersmarck's sources of inspiration

are not East German Cinema. His notions of heroism, self-sacrifice, and virtue were instead formed by years of watching Hollywood movies. *Lives* is an extended contrast between an imagination formed in the absence of art, and an imagination formed by the most powerful cultural force of the twentieth century, Western Cinema.³⁶

My understanding of Sternlieb's position is that the power of art is not restricted to "humanizing" its audience but also to make some want to become artists in their own right. Sternlieb continues:

This tension between Gerd Wiesler and von Donnersmarck must be at the foreground of any discussion of *Lives*, for the film is claiming not that exposure to art makes human beings good [...] but that Wiesler's exposure to art, like von Donnersmarck's exposure to cinema, impels him to be an artist himself.³⁷

This is an interesting speculation given that Wiesler's sad trajectory after he loses his position as a Stasi officer is steaming open letters and delivering circulars. Not particularly artistic pursuits. However, Wiesler does have a few effective creative moments when he has to credibly falsify his reports on what was going on in Dreyman's flat during the preparation of his bomb-shell article on suicide in the GDR. Wiesler's effort at creative writing were very successful and were the clues that lead Dreyman to appreciate Wiesler's

courage, and good works. Wiesler's attempt at fiction had to meet a very high standard, and an extremely critical audience, namely the Secret Police (the Stasi). If Wiesler had failed in this creative attempt he would have been harshly punished, if not executed, and the people he was trying to protect would have been punished in similar fashion.

In sum, the message that von Donnersmarck offers is that the GDR was prepared to destroy its citizens in order to preserve the ideals of the Socialist state—a version of the joke “The operation was a success but the patient died.” The director's other message is that art and the influence of the aesthetic has the power to turn a robotic unfeeling tool of the state, into an empathic saviour. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of empirical evidence to support this conjecture...

Art and Athena's Shield: Films Are Examples *Par Excellence* of the Way Art Functions

Film is a tremendously versatile teaching tool. Through film, we can engage with topics as diverse as classroom management and the moral impact of an artwork. We have seen the ways that film themes intersect with a great variety of contemporary topics and issues related to the arts. Because they are visual media, films reach across linguistic and cultural barriers. As I have used them in my classes, they function as ways of presenting important aspects of teaching and of bringing historical and cultural events to light. They offer up these issues so vividly that it is easy for students to debate and discuss them.

Even more important, films function in much the same way as all art: as tools for reflecting upon and grappling with lived experience. Arnheim offers a metaphor for the way in which art can function as a coping and learning mechanism.³⁸ He refers to Athena's mirrored shield, which she gave to Theseus in preparation for his battle with the Medusa. The Medusa was deadly: to meet her gaze, crowned as it was by writhing poisonous snakes, was to be turned into stone. Thus, Athena's mirrored shield allowed Theseus to behead the monster without ever looking directly at her. This is paradigmatic, says Arnheim, of the way that true art functions for us. We can confront our problems and challenges obliquely and contemplate difficult situations without freezing into inaction. Film offers powerful presentations of a vast range of experiences that allow us to maintain our distance and

reflect on what we have seen. Thus, films help us to cope with the challenging circumstances that inevitably confront us in our lives.

Author Bibliography

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APPENDIX

Questions for Assignment on *The Lives of Others*

- 1) What is the significance of Wiesler's suggestion to Sieland that she "remember her audience-her public"? What point do you think he is making? Where/when does he make this comment to her?
- 2) Dutton³⁹ lists what he believes are the twelve universal characteristic features of a work of art. Can you find four such characteristics in the film? Discuss the four characteristics that you think apply. Note that you need to respond to this question on two levels: there is the film itself as a work of art, and then there is the art presented within the universe of the film itself.
- 3) Tavin⁴⁰ refers critically to the supposed "humanizing power" of the aesthetic. What aesthetic position is Tavin attacking? What is Tavin's critique of this position? Can one infer from von Donnersmarck's film that he agrees with the sort of critique of the aesthetic that Tavin is making? Explain and support your answer.
- 4) According to you, which of Dreyman's artistic and non-artistic actions of resistance to the East German state, is the most effective? What light does this shed on von Donnersmarck's opinion of

the power of art to change the world? What event finally motivates Dreyman to take a stand?

- 5) Identify two moments in the film when Wiesler (the Stasi officer) does not act according to his training. Describe these moments and explain what beliefs he is forced to question/doubt.
- 6) Describe the aesthetic impact of Wiesler's apartment and of Dreyman's apartment. What function do these two living spaces serve, in terms of the message of the film? At the close of the film, Dreyman comes to realize that his private oasis was always under surveillance. Why is that a shock to him? What does his surprise at this revelation tell us about Dreyman?
- 7) According to the film, what makes a "good" man or woman?
- 8) Who was Berthold Brecht? Why is his work on theatre relevant to this film about art and politics? Two people other than Dreyman pick up a book by Brecht and read it appreciatively. Who are they? What is their fate in this film?
- 9) Is this film anti-Communist? What values does this film promote? What values does it criticize?
- 10) In her final scene, Sieland is wearing a white bath robe with a yellow star on the pocket. Given the context and the events that follow, do you think that this decoration has any historical resonance?
- 11) The Party Boss Bruno Hempf states smugly, "People don't change." Does this film illustrate his point? Who changes? Who doesn't?
- 12) Two doomed characters have a moment of quiet enjoyment reading Brecht poetry: Jerska and Wiesler. What is their connection? Why would the director connect these two figures in this way, making Brecht their common ground?

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