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Teaching Movies

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Background

Anne-Marie:

- Teacher of English language and literature (secondary school)
- Teacher trainer at UniLu (primary and secondary school teacher trainees)
- PhD: 'Fictions of Authority: Teachers, Enchanters and Mentors in selected fiction of Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt'

Jean-Marie:

- Teacher and researcher at the University of Luxembourg (Research unit: Language, Culture, Media and Identities)
- Master in theology, degree in social communication
- PhD in psychology: ‘Tutoring as an impossible task’

Workshop outline

- Presentation of the aims and objectives of our work with films in Luxembourg
- Examples of how we work: focus on teacher-student relationships; discourses; teacher as subject
- Discussion of our work and research

Examples of discourses and subjectivation

- Detachment
- Mona Lisa's Smile
- Dead Poets' Society

How we read the film (text product)

Elements:

- Metaphors
- Master signifiers, signifying chain
- Discourses (enunciation)
- Montage
- Effects on us as viewer, listener

Martha Nussbaum

‘Our actual relation to the books we love is already messy, complex, erotic. We do ‘read for life’, bringing to the literary texts we love (...) our pressing questions and perplexities, searching for images of what we might do and be, and holding these up against the images we derive from our knowledge of other conceptions, literary, philosophical, religious.’

(Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature)

A. S. Byatt

‘These grown-up human beings speak wisely and foolishly of other human beings: Margaret and Ursula, Forster and Lawrence, Birkin and Mr Wilcox as though they were (as they are) people they know (and don’t know). They know perfectly well, if reminded, that four of these beings are actually made of words, are capering word-puppets, not flesh and blood. (...) They can talk, they do talk, of what Margaret and Ursula “really wanted” or “should have done” or “might have become”, which Frederica knows to be critically illegitimate and guesses also to be what Lawrence and Forster might have wanted their readers to discuss. So we learn to understand. (...) **The class bring themselves to the text.**’ (*Babel Tower*)

Ignês Sodré & A. S. Byatt

psychoanalysis meets literature

‘We have allowed ourselves to **talk about the characters in the novels as though they were real people**, which is an almost primitive mode of discourse which literary criticism has eschewed for a long time. (...) We have lost the capacity to talk about them as their creators must have wanted us to, and as indeed we do in normal, unprofessional conversation. I feel what you and I have had is a sort of conversation which is sophisticated at one level and very deliberately primitive and naïve at another (...) to suspend for a moment - as one does when one is reading along - the knowledge that we are talking about something that isn’t true.’ (*Imagining Characters*)

Parallels novels - films

Text / Film = Product

- Story
- (Life-like) characters
- (realist) contexts
- pressing human concerns; showing anthropological structures

Reader / Viewer

- With demands of knowledge and love
- Desiring beings
- Identification processes (quest for learning, understanding, escaping...)
- Discourses and positions of the speaking subject

‘(...) classes function as therapeutic groups (...)’ (*Babel Tower*)

Our obsession: discourses and desire

‘Oh, I do like you, but it just isn’t good enough.

Oh, I forgot. Your mother asked me up for supper.

Okay. Bring some ice cream with you, will you?

Sure.

What kind do you want, chocolate or vanilla?’

Cinema ...

‘The problem for us is not, Are our desires satisfied or not? The problem is, How do we know what we desire? There is nothing spontaneous, nothing natural, about human desires. Our desires are artificial. We have to be taught to desire. Cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn’t give you what you desire, it tells you how to desire.’ (Slavoj Zizek)

‘Cinema is the art of appearances, it tells us something about reality itself. It tells us something about how reality constitutes itself.’ (Slavoj Zizek)

‘Film constructs a fantasy for spectators in order to allow them to see openly and publicly the hidden enjoyment that governs subjective experience. Through film, we see not our reality itself, but the fantasy structures that shape that reality.’ (Todd McGowan, 2007,32)



Aims and Objectives of the teacher-training course at UniLu

1.

- Provide a space for the analysis/discussion of teaching practices
- Allow for an 'undercover' method to deal with the individual teacher's personal/professional problems, the own subjectivity without requiring psychological exposure



Film + fictive character = protective screen

2.

- Analyse discourses around education and teaching
- Discuss the the effects of film-discourses on the students
- Analyse the position of the subjects in the different discourses
- Give teacher trainees a sense of professional context

Detachment: 2 scenes

While watching think about:

- Barthes's attitude regarding teaching
- His relationship to the students
- The discourse he adopts and moves within
- Barthes as subject in his uniqueness (divided?)





- Barthes's attitude to teaching is paradoxical: 'detachment' is what he advocates; yet his own past and the lack of guidance motivate him in his teaching
- His relationship to the students is one of distance, detachment and respect, care
- Discourse of the 'different' teacher who allows his students to leave and does not mind where they go (opposite of conventional school-rule-discourse); Barthes distances himself from traditional teaching methods (discourse of criticism of existing school system; discourse of the substitute teacher)
- Discourse of the (unwilling) saviour
- Subject: caught between awareness of need for guidance, desire to protect and detachment (a certain distance from his own wounds), refusal of responsibility

Mona Lisa's Smile: 1st lesson

While watching think about

- the teacher's attitude to knowledge
- the student's attitude to knowledge
- how attitudes to knowledge determine the relationship between teachers and learners
- the presence of the 'other'; the gaze of the other



- The teacher would like to share, to impart knowledge based on textbooks while taking the information further into wider, more independent artistic and intellectual fields; she is destabilized in her frontal teaching methods by the students who think they know.
- Students are proud of their knowledge, want to show off, use knowledge as a weapon against the new teacher, test their teacher, impose their dominance, their power, fail to see that there is more than textbook knowledge to be reached.
- Conflicting views on knowledge - and the extent and value of it - create a climate of competition, aggression, scorn.
- The presence of the 'other' introduces the dimension of observation, control by authority and the educational system.

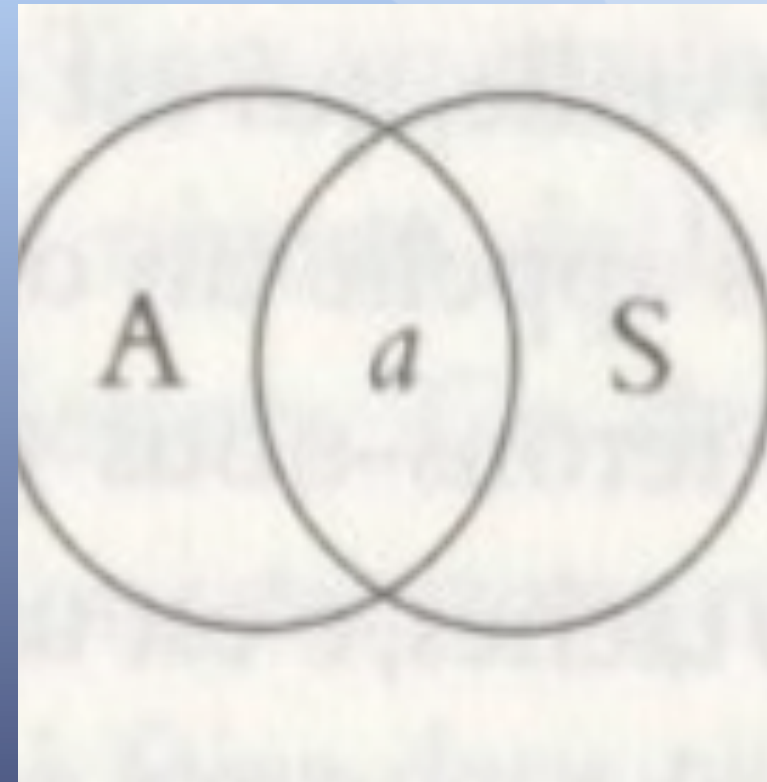
Didactical organization as symptom

The action of the teacher constitutes a symptom (i.e. a composite of the teacher's relationship to the class and of his attitude to knowledge). It represents (also) the return of the repressed.



What's the matter?

- Who decides which **object** we talk about in a lesson ?
- Insufficient reflection doesn't see that the pedagogical object is also a psychical object with unconscious intentions pervading in the classroom.



Mona Lisa's Smile: 2nd lesson

While watching think about

- Changing attitudes to knowledge
- Changes in teacher-student relationships



- Instead of frontal transmission of knowledge: joint exploration
- Conflicts around superiority-inferiority and dominance-submission disappear
- Challenge of critical thinking skills

Dead Poets' Society

While watching think about

- The kind of teacher Keating aims to be; Keating as a subject
- The discourses he moves in



- Keating: the alternative teacher
- Keating: the saviour, enchanter, the seducer, manipulator
- Discourse of change, of (dangerous?) innovative teaching methods
- Discourse of creativity, originality, individuality, freedom, life

YET: association of Keating with 'dead' poets and death



Robert C. Bulman: 'Teachers in the 'Hood:
Hollywood's Middle-Class Fantasy'
(*The Urban Review*, Vol.34, No.3, September 2002)

'This lone "teacher-hero" is always an outsider, one who has a troubled and mysterious past, little teaching experience, a good heart, and an unorthodox approach to teaching. (...) Invariably, the outsider succeeds where veteran professional teachers and administrators have repeatedly failed.'

Discourses and the social dimension

- As creatures of language we are always creatures of lack. We always ask ourselves how to achieve our aims as subjects, the fulfilment of our wishes.
- We hope to reach the fulfilment of our desires through social relations. In our attempts we are faced with the question how to incorporate ourselves as subjects within the collective without either losing ourselves and or exploding the collective. (Sauret)
- Since the social relation is linguistic in nature, Lacan qualifies it as discourse.

The teacher subjects himself to a discourse, and so he situates his position in the classroom, his relation to knowledge and so on.

- In their status and function as teacher the subject can choose between different stances, for example as
 - master
 - transmitter of knowledge
 - coach
 - (hysterical) researcher
 - analyst



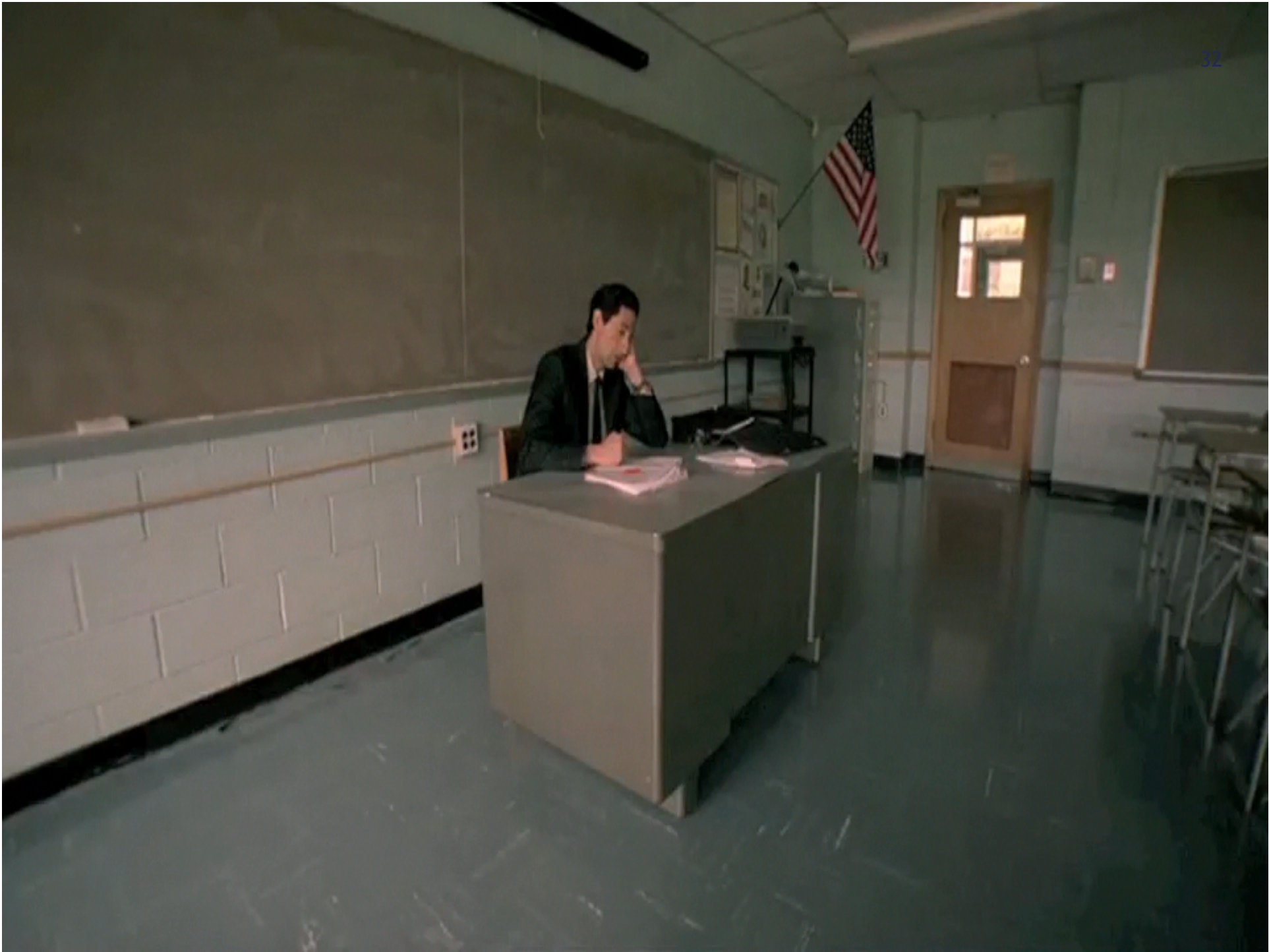
Development

Aspects of attitude to knowledge, teacher-student rapport, teacher as subject are apparent in the opening scenes of each film: teachers take a peep at their new classes, walk into their classrooms on the first day; they are nervous; they come with their ideas on teaching and education; they bring along their own past and their present.

Then they develop.

One example of development: Barthes

While watching focus on Barthes in his process as subject.



- Barthes: ready to face Meredith and her problems
- Complexity of situation: reinforced by his own past
- Gaze of the 'other': testing the firmness of him as a subject
- Emergence of Barthes as a subject: despite his own past he manages to stand up for Meredith and overcome the look of the other
- Paradox of detachment/attachment is solved: Barthes the stoic saviour

The act and the process of subjectivation

- Where we feel stuck or disoriented, where we feel constricted by social determinants, where the big Other (tutor, mentor, headmaster, university) is unable to respond, that's where the **psychic act** as defined by Lacan gains in importance. By acting, one dissociates oneself from alienations, one is ready to accept the consequences.
- One knows that through the act one **changes oneself as a subject**. This seems to me to be of importance for the processes of professionalization and subjectification of student teachers. With the act, a break, the student teacher takes a risk and tries to install a different relation to the transmission of knowledge and to the contract with students.
- The teacher in *Mona Lisa's Smile* tries to install another contract, which provides **the students also with a place as subjects**.



Discussion

- Parallel: subjectivation processes in film and in reality
- 'Teaching films': problems? dangers? benefits?
- Questions?

Real life? In and beyond the course ...

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Our reactions to the ‘white-shirt-action’

- Motivation behind the action?
- Fun? Surprise? Wish for drama? Identification with the course?
- Criticism of university teacher training?
- Criticism of film seminars?
- UniLu - Weber - Reuter: manipulators?

The students' reactions to the 'white-shirt-action'

- Support of classmates
- Wish to contribute to the liveliness of the seminar
- Wish 'to take over'
- Shock in the aftermath: 'how fast we took over the action of the film'; 'I'm shocked because I joined in easily and only afterwards came to think about the implications of the action'; 'how easy it is to give a group so much power'; 'to become part of a system or movement'; 'to let yourself be influenced by the will to support a group'
- Realization: film course replaced fascist project of the film



whistling presenters ...

Will to take over creativity? originality? Individuality of Keating?

Identification with charismatic teacher figure + awareness of dangers of manipulation: destabilized student-teachers

General reactions to the course

- Lively participation in analysis at first
- Desire to start teaching: ‘we don’t want to think about our job anymore; we’re fed up with theory; we want to DO the job.’
- Reluctance to delve deeply in the teacher’s psyche (‘Do you have to interpret everything?’)
- Interest in discussing alternative ways to deal with problems
- Interest in discourses

Ambivalence

- Interest in discussions
- Constant concern: borders/fusion professional-private life
- Interest in the discourses around teachers and education
- Loss within discourses: shattering of certainties
- Which discourse am I moving in? Which discourse do I want to endorse? Am I conservative or innovative?
- Destabilization
- Students are forced to think about their position; to take a stance

Our problems

- How much 'guidance' is needed (choice of topics to be dealt with; encouragement of in-depth exploration through questions...)
- Moving between description and analysis on the one hand, and the temptation to give in to the students' wish for advice and guidance
- Avoiding a moralising discourse

Conclusion

- Film/texts offer a propitious ground for discussion
- They challenge certainties
- They raise questions around authority, the attitude to knowledge, the personal motivations of the teacher
- They unsettle and thereby achieve progress in the student-teachers' own subjectivation

A parallax view ?



Interested in the lack, the gap, the presence through the absence

Truffaut

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxUbNVw1Lu4>



Thank you for your participation