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Film choices for screening literacy: the ‘Pygmalion template’ in the curriculum as contact zone

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This study discusses the representation of (the) literacy (myth) in popular movies and a teaching and research project on cinematic literacy narratives. It attempts to reveal the existence of a powerful ‘Pygmalion template’ in contemporary movie culture. Focusing on a discourse or culture clash ‘Pygmalion movies’ simultaneously contribute to the discursive construction and deconstruction of the literacy myth. Because of their polysemic character, these films offer fertile grounds for inquiring into the problematic nature of literacy acquisition and discourse or culture clashes. Inviting pre-service teachers to reflect on these issues, the authors created a curriculum as contact zone in which films are used as a primary source of knowledge and insight together with students’ movie analyses and interpretations, personal narratives, and theoretical readings. This exploratory study of on-line discussion groups revealed the students’ contradictory and competing movie readings. Organizing the curriculum as a contact zone deepened the students’ and one’s own understanding of literacy as an ideological site of struggle in (movie) culture.

Keywords: contact zone; literacy (myth); narrative; teacher education; visual literacy

Since the late 1980s, the topic of (cultural) literacy has never been far away from public and professional debate on culture, literacy, and education. Not only have back-to-basics ideologists been drawing attention to the fact that literacy and culture are no longer unproblematic concepts, but also more progressive thinkers from both (New) literacy studies and cultural studies have focused on the complexity of contemporary society. From these (anti-)disciplines, we learned that culture and literacy have exploded into a myriad of different literacies and countless ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural practices, all worth studying. Today, teaching ‘the best that has been

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thought and said in the world' (Arnold 1960: 6) has been reduced to a nostalgic echo from the past. Since the arbiters of taste have been silenced, almost everything that has been thought and said seems to offer the possibility of worthwhile teaching, given the right approach.

Not only have the concepts of literacy and culture become multiple, but also personal identities are said to have multiplied over the past decades. Today, individuals have to cope with 'multiple identities' (Hall 1997) or 'multilayered identities' (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) in 'multilayered lifeworlds' (New London Group 1996). Contemporary society has become increasingly globalized and culturally and linguistically diverse, a process closely connected to the multiplicity of communication channels and media. These developments all contribute to a 'state of educational "fragmentation"', as it was called by Graff (1992: 58). The New London Group (1996) contended that education should make great efforts to prepare students for civic pluralism and diversity to cope with the multiple lifeworlds of this new context. These arguments presuppose that schools today should refrain from 'writing over existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture' and should adopt 'models of pedagogy that depart from the idea that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream represent a deficit' (p. 72).

According to Gee (1996, 2005), literacy is far more than the ability to read and write; it is no less than mastery of a specific (dominant) 'secondary Discourse',¹ and thus inextricably connected to identity and ideology. Gee used the concept of 'Discourse' (with a capital D) to indicate a whole way of being in the world. Gee (1996: 190) emphasizes the inestimable importance of studying and critically reflecting in education on the 'Discourse maps' in view of the ubiquitous problem of identity in contemporary society. Gee notices that the phenomenon of Discourse (or culture) clash and the often-related problems of alienation, worry about 'self', and identity crisis, seem especially tangible in the heterogeneous US society, in which high social mobility, diffuse class and cultural borders, and a strong tendency to strive for the 'mainstream' (or dominant Discourses) can be perceived.

In such a context, teachers themselves should be multi-Discoursal, and teaching requires the ability to reflect on the heterogeneity of contemporary society. In particular, teachers should not refrain from analysing and discussing the pain and the sense of estrangement associated with Discourse or culture clashes and with the struggle to become 'bi-Discoursal' (Gee 1996: 136) or even multi-Discoursal, which is in fact part of the essence of becoming educated. How can educators prepare pre-service teachers for this complex and difficult task?

During the last few years, we have been tackling the problem of literacy and Discourse or culture clashes through a teaching and research project on cinematic literacy narratives. In our teaching about and research on 'culture, literacy, and education' in the teacher-education programme and pedagogical sciences curriculum at Ghent University in Belgium, we start from the idea that people construct meaning by representation (da Silva 1999, Hall 1997). Movies, in particular, may be described in contemporary everyday life as important tools of representation and influential meaning-makers. Inviting our student teachers to reflect on the topic of literacy,

we created a curriculum as a contact zone² in which films are used as a primary source of knowledge and insight, together with students' personal narratives, theoretical readings, and students' own movie analyses and interpretations.

In this paper, we discuss a specific series of movies in which literacy—as defined by Gee—constitutes a main theme. 'Pygmalion movies' thematize the socio-cultural debate on literacy itself by focusing on a Discourse or culture clash. These films represent these issues on a concrete micro-level, which allows students to experience the matter vicariously and examine it through particular visual narratives. In particular, we maintain that Pygmalion movies—precisely because of their central theme—offer more fertile grounds for inquiring into the deeper ideological layers of problematic concepts such as literacy and culture than the average (Hollywood) school film. Before we turn our attention to these cinematic literacy narratives and to our didactic approach, however, we look briefly at the integration of visual (popular) culture—and more specifically film—in education and educational/literacy research.

Visual media, popular culture, and education

In the past two decades, and especially since the mid-1990s, educators have witnessed an ever-increasing interest in popular and visual culture in education in general and in educational research in particular. This growing fascination for various visual media (film, television, comics, games, etc.) may be described from the perspectives of media literacy, cultural studies, and pedagogy.

Given the ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society and the realization that media representations contribute to construct images and understanding of the world, it only seems appropriate that scholars and educators have argued, and still argue, strongly in favour of a critical media-literacy and the development of media-education projects. Worldwide numerous organizations promote the importance of media literacy in various ways, encouraging young people to become active, critical participants in the media culture in which they are immersed. Countless publications have dealt with the theory and practice of media literacy and media education.³ A better understanding of what it is to be media-literate, and the development of an effective pedagogy and teaching methods for media-literacy, remain important challenges in current research, as expressed in the UK Charter for Media Literacy (2005).

The importance of film in particular as one of the most influential meaning-making practices of the 20th century has gained widespread recognition. In 1999, the Film Education Working Group [FEWG] (1999: para. 2) in the UK made a plea for regarding film, video, and television as an integral part of literacy in the 21st century:

FEWG calls for a fresh approach to the moving image by education policy-makers. Critical understanding of film, video, and television will be a key competence and integral part of literacy in the 21st century. And the spread of

digital technologies means acquiring creative skills in moving image production will grow in importance.

However sound such statements may seem today, they have long been anything but obvious, especially with regard to pedagogical research and educational sciences in Europe. Despite the important work of pioneers like David Buckingham and others, until fairly recently these disciplines were populated with scholars and professionals 'who at best neglect the world of images and at worst, refuse to even consider that images and visual phenomena could be conveyers of relevant information' (Fischman 2000: 5). The past decade, however, witnessed a growing interest in this field in visual culture as a primary source of knowledge and understanding, apart from the mere illustrative use of images.

This development can certainly be attributed to the undeniable influence of cultural studies and its longstanding preoccupation with (visual) popular culture and media representations. Cultural studies contributed to the increasing awareness that besides 'education through pictures', there is also 'education in pictures' (Depaepe and Henkens 2000: 15). We note a clear tendency over the past few years towards a cross-over between cultural studies and education⁴ and an expansion of educational research in which scholars focus on the educational implications of visual media such as films, magazines, and games.

Movies as 'teaching machines'

The most passionate advocate of a partnership between cultural studies, pedagogy, and education is undoubtedly Henry A. Giroux. From the early 1990s onward, Giroux has advocated an understanding of media culture as pedagogy. He critically scrutinizes the (often harmful) politics, moral messages, and pedagogical implications of popular cultural artefacts and cultural practices often ignored by educators, ranging from Calvin Klein advertising and Disney to the child beauty-pageant industry. According to Giroux, such artefacts and practices exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others and society as a whole.

In his engagement with the narratives, metaphors, and images of popular culture, Giroux (1994) especially focuses on (Hollywood) films. Popular movies, to Giroux (2002: 6) are no less than a 'form of public pedagogy—a visual technology that functions as a powerful teaching machine'. Movies exercise an important influence on the public imagination, produce ideologies, and shape both individual and national identities. Giroux is fully aware of the fact that young people today often learn more about important issues such as race, class, sexuality, and violence from movies than from work in school.⁵ Therefore, Giroux argues strongly in favour of using films as pedagogical texts.

Although Giroux's ideological critique of Hollywood movies and his exposure of Hollywood pedagogy, mostly aimed at hidden and harmful political and cultural effects, is applauded by many scholars, it also makes him the target of severe criticism. In an otherwise favourable paper on

Giroux's work, Kellner (2001: 232), for example, admits somewhat reluctantly that:

The political contextualization, critique, and focus of Giroux's work, however, sometimes lead his exercises in cultural studies and critical pedagogy to what might be called a political and ideological over-determination of his readings of specific cultural texts. ... There is in Giroux a perhaps too quick collapse of the aesthetic and textual into the political in some of his readings.

In some way, Kellner is referring to the polysemic character, the polyinterpretability, and (to a certain degree) the aesthetic autonomy of cultural representations such as movies.

It seems to be the decisive character and a lack of nuance in Giroux's movie analyses and interpretations which are repugnant to more than one critic or scholar. Buckingham (1996: 642) has considered the discourse of critical pedagogy as suffering from a kind of self-righteousness in that the critic, 'by virtue of his or her superior insight, is able to "see through" the texts and to expose what is "really" taking place'. Giroux is fully aware of this unfavourable criticism of his own ideological and pedagogical approach. In the introduction to *Breaking in to the Movies* (Giroux 2002), he anticipates possible criticism with the following benevolent statement, in which he defends his Hollywood pedagogy and teaching methods:

Throughout these essays, I provide a particular reading of the films I analyse, but in doing so I am not suggesting that my analyses in any way offer interpretations that make a claim to either certainty or finality. My analyses of films are necessarily partial, incomplete, and open to revision and contestation. Rather than closing down student participation, my own interpretations are meant to be strategic and positional, eschewing the notion that any type of closure is endemic to my perspectives on particular films while at the same time using my own position to encourage students to think more critically about their own interpretations as they enter into dialogue about films. (p. 13)

Giroux is emphasizing the fact that he does not have a monopoly on wisdom and that his interpretations of particular films are meant to generate a heterogeneity of student readings and repertoires. In this sense, Giroux looks upon himself as a 'facilitator', urging students to develop their own (critical) view on the matter.

In our own teaching and research project on literacy, we wanted to adopt Giroux's notion of movies as 'teaching machines'. This notion implies two perspectives, resulting in two questions:

- What do (popular) movies teach us?
- How can we use (popular) movies to teach?

The second question is related to our attempt to incorporate movies into our curriculum in a central way by creating a contact zone. An important concern was to avoid the kind of criticism that Giroux had to deal with by doing justice to the polysemic character of film texts and by allowing for multiple readings as an integral part of our teaching approach. However, we now turn our attention to the first question, which is concerned with the preparation and assessment of content, that is: choosing and analysing the most appropriate movies.

Cinematic literacy narratives: the 'Pygmalion template'

In the process of conceptualizing how to take up films as 'teaching machines', we realized that a thorough preparation and assessment of content are necessary precursors to developing a powerful learning environment. Such a preparation may identify patterns of representation or specific images that warrant further examination. Therefore, we collected a wide variety of films and conducted a textual and intertextual examination of the representation of literacy in the movies.

Literature review

Since the early 1990s, many papers and books have been published dealing with the genre of popular 'school films'⁶ (Trier 2001, 2003, 2005). Occasionally we also encountered the terms 'high school movie' (Cohen 1996) and 'teacher film' (Ayers 2001). This research is closely connected to the growing interest in visual culture within the field of education mentioned earlier, but has to be linked simultaneously to the fact that, especially from the late 1980s onwards, the Hollywood school film became very visible and popular. Graff (2003: 19) accounts for this popularity and fascination by pointing to the democratization of higher education:

Creeping intellectualism has become pervasive, with the growth of a college-educated audience created by the postwar democratization of higher education, an audience that is fascinated by the culture of teaching and learning. The fascination is reflected in the popularity of films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Educating Rita*, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Legally Blonde*, and countless others.

Research on the school film focused on various aspects (teachers, students, race, class, etc.), but surprisingly little has been said about the topic of literacy in this film genre.

Giroux (2002: 83) touches upon the problem of literacy in his analyses of well-known school films like *Stand and Deliver* (Menéndez 1988)⁷ and *Dead Poets Society* (Weir 1989), in which he criticizes the nostalgic representation of 'high-culture canonicity'. According to Giroux, these movies present a depoliticized literacy without any corrections from such categories as race, class, or gender, legitimating the traditional canon instead of encouraging students to reflect critically on their own position in relation to the knowledge that is passed on. In the case of *Dangerous Minds* (Smith 1995), Giroux (2002: 148) sees 'whiteness' represented as an archetype of rationality and 'cultural literacy'. He criticizes the various literacies propagated in the movie (e.g. Dylan Thomas's poetry, table manners) as elements of a white, middle-class lifestyle or Discourse, being of little use to ghetto kids of colour. According to Giroux (2002), the emphasis on these kinds of literacies suggests that 'to succeed in life, working-class kids ... need the cultural capital of white middle-class people like [the character] LouAnne' (p. 155), while LouAnne is 'teaching them to be part of a system that oppresses them' (p. 154). To a certain degree Giroux seems to touch upon

the Western ‘literacy myth’, to which we will return later in this paper. His analyses partly concur with those of Christensen (1995), Cohen (1996), and Gale and Densmore (2001). In their penetrating ‘second screening’ of *Dangerous Minds*, Gale and Densmore (2001: 606) notice that Hollywood teacher LouAnne Johnson is only carrying out an ‘apparent renegotiation of the curriculum’ since ‘it is *her* cultural capital that is legitimated’, whereas the students’ hip-hop literacies are regarded as irrelevant.

Ayers (2001) and Dalton (1995, 1999, 2004) deal briefly with the subject of literacy when they talk about the ‘Hollywood curriculum’. Ayers (2001: 205–208) regards the curriculum in school films as ‘immutable and unproblematic’, with the inevitable and occasional Hollywood teacher working enthusiastically for ‘a campaign of cultural literacy that would make Allan Bloom proud’.⁸ Dalton (2004: 37) on the other hand notes that the cinematic curriculum is not unproblematic because Hollywood teachers use a ‘personalized curriculum’ to establish a bond with their students. However, she recognizes that the individualized rebelliousness of the Hollywood teacher does not change the status quo. Ultimately, these popular school films must be regarded as narratives of social conformity.

One of the few exceptions to this absence of literacy as a main topic in research on the school film genre is the work of James Trier. As a teacher educator, Trier (2001, 2003, 2005) developed a range of activities in which school films are considered as important public narratives on education and in which these films are analysed and interpreted by students as a supplement to theoretical readings. Trier (2001, 2006) describes teaching and research projects in which he problematizes students’ traditional views on literacy by introducing them to a Discourses-oriented, socio-cultural view on literacy through film texts. In this sense, Trier’s work is closely related to our own teaching and research project on literacy narratives.⁹

Apart from school films, many movies contain representations of literacy practices or literacy events. Research however is thin on the ground. Williams and Zenger (2007) deal with the representation of everyday literacy practices and events in popular movies, but it was a ground-breaking paper by Eldred and Mortensen (1992), entitled ‘Reading literacy narratives’, which contributed to our discovery of a series of movies in which literacy—as it is defined by Gee—constitutes a main theme.

The ‘Pygmalion template’

Although Trier showed convincingly that the school film may be used to reflect on literacy and the problem of Discourses, we focused our attention on a movie genre that thematizes literacy and the problem of Discourse or culture clashes itself: the ‘Pygmalion movie’. Whereas some (or even most) school films unmistakably contain interesting elements to draw upon for problematizing these issues, Pygmalion movies put them at the centre of their narratives through a makeover of the protagonist(s). School films often deal with the topic of makeover, too—because education in itself has everything to do with ‘changing’ or transforming individuals—but this process is seldom emphasized as strongly as in the Pygmalion movie.

Eldred and Mortensen (1992) hardly touch upon movies because they are first of all concerned with literary works, especially with George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913), adapted for the screen as the musical *My Fair Lady* (Cukor 1964). Shaw constructed his play out of two elements: the classical Pygmalion myth and the literacy myth. The literacy myth refers to the easy and often unfounded assumption that 'better' literacy (or mastering a dominant secondary Discourse, to put it in Gee's words) necessarily leads to all sorts of 'good things': economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement (Graff 1979, 1995). The Pygmalion myth stems from Greek mythology, and was adapted by the Latin poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* in which the sculptor Pygmalion creates a beautiful ivory statue in female form. He falls in love with his own creation and prays to Venus for a wife like his ivory masterpiece. Venus takes pity on him and turns marble into warm flesh, Pygmalion marries his statue come to life,¹⁰ and they live happily ever after.

Shaw remade this narrative by preserving only a few basic elements of the myth and situating his own play in early-20th century London: a phonetics professor (Henry Higgins, alias Pygmalion) agrees to a wager that he can teach an impoverished flower girl (Eliza Doolittle, alias Galatea) to speak 'properly' and make her presentable in high society. In Shaw's play, the Pygmalion motif functions as a metaphor for the process of literacy acquisition and Eliza's transformation into a 'duchess'. Essential to Higgins's teaching efforts is the 'Pygmalionesque desire' to change a human being into his own image, to 'animate the inanimate' (Bloom 2000). In this sense, Shaw's *Pygmalion* has been called 'the Shavian creation myth' (Reynolds 1999).

Shaw has to be seen as the founding father of an archetypal literacy narrative in contemporary literary and visual culture. Thus, Eldred and Mortensen (1992: 513) noted that:

Shaw's well-known *Pygmalion* raises many questions about the process and politics of language acquisition and thus serves as an introduction to the concept of literacy narratives and as a model against which we can read others.

Because Eldred and Mortensen do not focus their attention on such other literacy narratives in visual culture, we tried to fill this gap. Our research showed the existence of what we call a 'Pygmalion template' (Verdoodt 2004) in contemporary popular movie culture, continually producing variations on the basic elements of Shaw's *Pygmalion* and/or Cukor's *My Fair Lady*.¹¹ Many movies can be situated within this Pygmalion tradition through the use of either an obvious or a more subtle intertextuality: explicitly referring to plot and characters or making subtle allusions through the *mise-en-scène*. By focusing on a Discourse or culture clash, Pygmalion movies problematize the ideological implications of literacy and the ways that literacy acquisition affects the formation of identity. These films develop discursive constructs of literacy, sketching trajectories that lead from cultural margins to mainstream, dominant cultural environments, and focus on particular emblems and attributes such as accent, dress codes, and cultural taste. Typically, these movies present a mentor-mentee relationship in which a mentor (creator) introduces a 'pupil' (creation) into new

literacies, an act that causes a radical transformation or metamorphosis, often resulting in a (temporary) crisis of identity of both protagonists. In this sense, Pygmalion movies could be considered to be a specific sub-genre of the so-called 'makeover movies'.¹²

We contend that the 'Pygmalion movie' has to be considered as a specific film genre. An important indication for this contention is the fact that the Pygmalion template has now reached the stage of parody, as seen in movies like *Small Time Crooks* and *Miss Congeniality*. In *Small Time Crooks*, for example, Michael Caine is in a sense caricaturing his own performance as a Pygmalion figure in *Educating Rita*. According to Schatz (1981: 39), parodies are 'a good indication of how we become familiar with a genre's conventions and appreciate seeing these conventions subverted'. Subverting the conventions is also precisely what happens in Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*, in which the typical gender roles are switched round by presenting a dominant female protagonist 'moulding' her male creation. And in the science fiction movies mentioned above, Eliza Doolittle is replaced by a robot or a digital image.

Given the fact that Pygmalion movies always show a makeover of some kind, we describe these films as a combination of cinematic literacy narratives and 'narratives of socialization'. According to Eldred and Mortensen (1992: 513), literacy narratives are:

stories ... that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy. ... [and] sometimes include explicit images of schooling and teaching; they include texts that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy.

Narratives of socialization are defined by Eldred and Mortensen (1992: 513) as 'stories that chronicle a character's attempt to enter a new social (and discursive) arena'. From our research, we learned that Pygmalion movies and school films are not mutually exclusive, but there are few examples of what Keroes (1999: 106) describes as 'student-teacher versions of Pygmalion', *Educating Rita* being the most famous. In most Pygmalion movies, we note a process of informal education, which is often set in private spaces and represented as an interaction between two adults. Hence, we prefer to speak about a mentor-mentee relationship.

In our textual research on Pygmalion movies, we chose to conduct a narrative analysis, focusing on binary oppositions. These binary oppositions can be gleaned both from the movement of the plot and from the representational motifs of the mise-en-scène or cinematography (Turner 1999). We noticed that the various Pygmalion movies reflect a changing socio-cultural reality in their variations on Shaw's play and Cukor's movie, given the whole range of Discourses presented in these films. However, the deep structure of these movies usually consists to a certain degree in the same binary oppositions in which 'high' culture (of any kind) is set against 'low' culture (of any kind) or a dominant Discourse is contrasted with a non-mainstream Discourse. In this sense, Pygmalion movies could be considered as 'mythical' texts, presenting a fundamental dilemma or contradiction within a culture, expressed in the form of dichotomies. Lévi-Strauss (1963: 224) noticed that 'mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution'.

Given the symbolic resolution or mediation offered to the problematic dichotomies presented in a Pygmalion movie, we can determine the position of a particular movie in relation to literacy and the literacy myth.¹³ This resolution or mediation varies from one movie to another: in some cases a synthesis is worked out in the form of a suggestion of marriage or a romantic relationship between two protagonists (e.g. *My Fair Lady*, *She's All That*); in other cases both sides of the dichotomy are affirmed as equally true or important (e.g. *Miss Congeniality*). Sometimes one side of the dichotomy is privileged (e.g. *Small Time Crooks*, *Bicentennial Man*); and exceptionally we notice the revealing absence of a resolution or mediation (e.g. *Nikita*).

From our narrative research, we conclude that most Pygmalion movies have to be seen as ideological sites of struggle and polysemic artefacts, contributing simultaneously to the discursive construction and deconstruction of the literacy myth in popular movie culture.

The curriculum as contact zone

Because of their polysemic character, Pygmalion films provide fertile grounds for inquiring into the problematic nature of literacy and Discourse or culture clashes. Our analysis of the Pygmalion template learns that a complex, Discourses-oriented theory of literacy is incorporated and illustrated in popular movie culture. The huge responsibility of a mentor who is providing new literacies but at the same time moulding new identities, the protagonists' struggle to become bi-Discoursal, the assimilating power of dominant Discourses, and so on, are all problematized in this movie genre.

Henry Higgins (Shaw 2000: 81–82) thought it was 'frightfully interesting ... to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being'. Is this not precisely what happens in education in general? We think pre-service teachers should be aware of the above-mentioned aspects of literacy. We want them to reflect on the transformative power of literacy and on the (unseen) Discourse or culture clashes which take place in education and in our society at large. The Pygmalion template can be used as a powerful teaching tool enabling and supporting critical awareness of such issues. Although Pygmalion movies were not produced with pedagogical concerns in mind, our narrative research showed that these popular movies have at least the potential to function as critical 'teaching machines'.

Our pre-service teachers constitute a heterogeneous group of both 3rd- or 4th-year undergraduates and 1st-year postgraduates.¹⁴ The diploma they are pursuing gives an official teaching qualification for secondary education. Our student teachers enter the teacher-education programme from diverse academic backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences, including linguistics, literary theory, art history, pedagogy, etc. In most cases, they do not have a specific film studies background.

A screening of the movies *My Fair Lady* and *Educating Rita* provided shared experiences and a common starting-point from which our students could examine the issues under discussion. In response to these screenings, students were asked both to interpret five key scenes/sequences and to link the movies to stories from their own personal background in on-line discussion

groups. They were asked to answer the following questions about each movie scene/sequence or the movie in general:

- (1) Interpret the scene/sequence. What is its meaning? What do you learn about the representation of literacy and cultural differences? (We asked students to pay attention to characters, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography.)
- (2) Relate these literacy narratives to your own experience or to the personal narratives of others.
- (3) Relate these literacy narratives to other movies which you might have seen.

We first asked each student to answer these questions individually in an on-line learning environment in which small groups of eight students participated. After that, students were asked to reply at least twice to what their colleagues had written. They could agree or disagree with the interpretations of other participants or they could comment on the personal narratives of their fellow-students. These on-line discussion groups were allowed to continue over a few weeks. In this way, multiple and competing movie readings were generated and (sometimes fiercely) discussed. The curriculum and the (virtual) classroom became a contact zone and a site of struggle, activated by and reflecting in some way the ideological site of struggle represented in the movies. Describing this kind of curriculum, we cannot leave unmentioned Pratt's (1991: para. 7) famous statement in which she used the notion of the 'contact zone' to describe 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'. On the one hand, Pratt's wording may be regarded as a striking characterization of what is precisely represented in the *Pygmalion* movies. On the other hand, these movies are at the centre of our own curriculum approach, in which different representations, narratives, and interpretations indeed 'meet, clash, and grapple with each other'.

In addition to the on-line discussion groups, we simultaneously added another dimension to this contact zone of different voices by bringing in theoretical readings from Bourdieu (1979) and Gee (1996, 2005). By doing so, we provided the students with a language to articulate their movie interpretations. Also, these initial interpretations were enriched because particular concepts (e.g. 'dominant Discourse', 'cultural capital', etc.) functioned as guidelines for a 'close reading' of the selected movie scenes/sequences.

Finally, we gave the students a research assignment: they had to choose a *Pygmalion* movie—or a movie which contained at least a *Pygmalion*-like aspect—and analyse and interpret it with regard to the representation of literacy. The following research questions functioned as a guideline:

- (1) How is (are) literacy (literacies) represented in the movie? (Focus on binary oppositions by paying attention to characters, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematography.)
- (2) Does the movie contribute to the construction or deconstruction of the literacy myth?

- (3) Which relation does the movie have with *Pygmalion/My Fair Lady* and *Educating Rita*? (Focus on intertextual references and binary oppositions.)

To enable students to accomplish this task, we made them familiar with our own narrative and intertextual analysis of *My Fair Lady* and *Educating Rita*, which focused on binary oppositions. We also introduced them to some basic elements that make up the language of the moving image, which was necessary because most of our students do not have a film studies background. All this provided the students with a model to analyse movies, and both films functioned as models that could be contrasted with their own movie choices. Furthermore, students could also integrate some of the theoretical concepts, to which we introduced them earlier in their analyses. Eventually, these assignments had to be presented during seminars so that once again discussions regarding the representation of literacy in particular movies were generated.

Some students chose to analyse movies from our own data collection (e.g. *Pretty Woman*, *Nikita*, *The Shape of Things*) but others came up with surprising movie choices and by doing so, they extended our collection of (Pygmalion) films. Some students focused on an analysis and interpretation of movies portraying so-called 'feral children' who move from a natural state towards a literate, 'civilized' condition under the influence of a mentor (e.g. *Greystoke*, *The Legend of Tarzan* (Hudson 1984) or *L'Enfant Sauvage* (Truffaut 1970)). Others located movies set in non-Western cultures (e.g. *The Scent of the Green Papaya* (Tran 1993)). Most of our students were able to provide us with insightful analyses and interpretations. Starting from the important binary oppositions that structure these cinematic narratives, they managed to interpret the specific representation of (the) literacy (myth) in these movies and to make an interesting comparison with the models we provided.

Educating Rita

It would lead us too far to discuss here in detail the course of all the on-line discussion groups mentioned above. Nor will we give a complete overview here of every topic brought into the debate. Our main purpose is to sketch our overall didactic approach. It is also important to note that at this stage only a small part of the data has been examined. Nevertheless, in this section we attempt to give an impression of the interpretations and discussions that arose in response to one particularly important scene from the movie *Educating Rita*. Before presenting some selected quotations from students, we briefly summarize the context of this sequence within the film's narrative.

The setting of this pivotal scene near the end of the movie is Professor Frank Bryant's sumptuous home, where he receives Rita, to whom he has been teaching literature at the British Open University for a considerable time. Rita, a 26-year-old hairdresser who decided to seek an education at the Open University to escape her oppressive working-class background and marriage, has gradually worked her way into 'high' culture and the

‘academia Discourse’ under Bryant’s tutelage. Bryant, however, experiences some kind of Pygmalionesque disillusionment, as he feels that too much of Rita’s original charming personality has been destroyed in the process of transforming her into a literate and educated person, who is acceptable to the academic world and the (upper-) middle classes. In this particular scene, we witness a confrontation between Frank—somewhat drunk as usual and completely disenchanted with his own ‘high’ culture—and Rita, who is very enthusiastic about her new state of mind. When Frank openly expresses his scepticism about this, we hear the following conversation:

Rita: What you can’t bear is that I am educated now. ... I’ve got what you have an’ y’ don’t like it. ... I don’t need you anymore. I’ve got a room full of books. I know what clothes to wear, what wine to buy, what plays to see, what papers and books to read. I can do without you.

Frank: Is that all you wanted? Have you come all this way for so very little?

Rita: Oh it’s little to you, isn’t it? It’s little to you who squanders every opportunity and mocks and takes it all for granted.

Frank: Found a culture, have you, Rita? Found a better song to sing, have you? No—you have found a different song, that’s all. And on your lips it’s shrill and hollow and tuneless. Oh, Rita, Rita. ...

The interpretation of this scene is of crucial importance in answering the questions mentioned earlier about the representation of (the) literacy (myth). We were particularly interested in readings or meanings that would be activated by our students with regard to Bryant’s bleak vision of his own literacies and ‘high’ culture versus Rita’s idealistic enthusiasm. What did our students think about Bryant’s reproachful comment ‘Have you come all this way for so very little?’ Could they agree with Frank’s opinion that Rita did not find a ‘better song’ to sing after all, but simply ‘a different song’, which was not worth all the efforts? Or would they share Rita’s view of (academic) literacy, education, and ‘high’ culture as precious goods. Both positions are possible because our narrative analysis showed that *Educating Rita* attributes both positive and negative connotations to literacy and ‘high’ culture. Or perhaps our students did not want to choose between the two and preferred to see them as equally true? In any case, these questions and considerations go to the heart of the socio-cultural and ideological debate on literacy, the (intrinsic) value of ‘high’ culture, and the clash between different literacies or Discourses.

A first exploratory analysis of the data from the on-line discussion groups showed that students’ interpretations could roughly be divided into two positions. One group tended to disagree with Frank Bryant’s reproachful comment. The following passage is exemplary for many students who take this reading position:

I don’t think Frank is right when he claims that Rita is just singing a different song.... Right from the beginning, Rita aimed at a position in which she was able to make choices. That was the main reason, I think, for her to seek an education at Open University. She had not discovered herself yet and at this moment in the movie, she has achieved the possibility of making choices. In this respect, I believe that she improved her initial situation and that she has

found ‘a better song’ to sing. You can also derive this from the fact that she looks much happier at this stage in the film. She seems to blossom.¹⁵

We notice that this line of interpreting connects to a certain extent with Keroes’s interpretation of the movie. Keroes (1999: 110) also compares Rita with Eliza in the following comment:

In *Educating Rita*, in place of a romance between teacher and student, we’re given a romantic view of education ... we have romanticized the power of education, have internalized the fantasy that a flower girl can become a duchess through education, that literacy in particular leads to a better life, a fantasy *Educating Rita* knowingly entertains. ... For Eliza, literacy means a loss of independence; for Rita, it’s a guarantee. Any loss she feels, including that of her marriage and connection to her family, is more than compensated by the gain.

Students who share these views clearly tend to emphasize the positive connotations of literacy acquisition which *Educating Rita* offers its viewers (i.e. literacy as empowerment). In this sense, they feel that eventually literacy and ‘high’ culture (one side of the central dichotomy) are to a certain extent privileged in this movie. Seen from this point of view, *Educating Rita* contributes to the construction of the literacy myth in contemporary visual culture.

There was a small number of students who partly shared this interpretation, but added a nuance. We draw on another student’s comment to show this kind of more sophisticated thinking:

We could argue that Rita found a better culture, but then only in her specific case (by this I mean that acquiring ‘high’ culture is not necessarily better in general or as a rule). She [Rita] is happier: she is able to make choices for herself, while she used to be stuck within the cultural codes of her social background (e.g. she was expected to have a baby instead of pursuing an education).

Although she recognizes the fact that Rita improved her particular situation, this student draws attention to the idea that mastering a dominant Discourse in society does not necessarily lead to happiness or individual improvement. In this sense, she rather tends to criticize the literacy myth.

Most students, however, chose another explicit interpretative position. Activating and emphasizing the negative connotations of literacy, ‘high’ culture, and the academic Discourse, these students look upon Rita’s newly acquired Discourse as nothing more than ‘a different song’:

As the movie develops, I completely agree with those who hold the opinion that Rita gradually becomes aware of the fact that she is only singing a different song. I cannot really support the viewpoint of those who think Rita has turned into a happier person by achieving her goal. After all, we see Rita confronted with embarrassing situations under the influence of which this so-called ‘better song’ eventually sounds out of tune. The romantic aspect of academia fades away when looking at the unhappy and alcoholic Frank. And what’s the point of having ‘high culture’ and a lot of knowledge when you are a psychic wreck who wants to commit suicide as in the case of Rita’s best friend Trish? I have to conclude that Rita clearly sings ‘a different song’.

This passage reveals the interaction between students during the on-line debates; students are learning by bringing different perspectives together and organizing a productive dialogue. Students who offered similar readings

of this scene, and of the movie in general, tended to stress the connotations of literacy as disillusionment or identity crisis:

In this scene, Rita still has a very high opinion of literature and academic culture. But some events later on (Trish's suicide attempt and Frank's increasing alcoholism) force her to change that opinion. At the end of the movie, Rita realizes that academic culture is only 'different' from her own cultural background, and not so much 'better'. She gets a more realistic image of the academic culture. The romantic aspect of the academic world fades away.

Such comments point to *Educating Rita* as contributing to the deconstruction of the literacy myth. Occasionally, students also referred to the cinematic language to emphasize the growing distance and changing relation between Frank and Rita:

Also the mise-en-scène contributes to the fact that the relationship between the two of them [Frank and Rita] has changed. There is, literally, more distance between them. Lighting and colour also contribute in this scene to create a dusky, less happier atmosphere.

Only a few students explicitly stated that the film contributed at the same time both to the construction and to the deconstruction of the literacy myth, but even in this case, students tend to emphasize one interpretation:

What you say is true: the literacy myth is both constructed and deconstructed. Although I think that in this kind of movies, all in all, the literacy myth mostly dominates. As it was already mentioned in this group, in the end things turn out pretty well for Rita, Billy Elliot [*Billy Elliot* (Daldry 2000)], Vivian [*Pretty Woman*], etc.: they succeed (their 'American dream' is realized) and find happiness, they obtain a better station in life, earn respect, ... It is indeed true that 'literate people', like Frank, are also represented in their unhappiness, but eventually things end well for them too.

This student, replying to a fellow-student and referring to previous comments, is showing clear awareness of *Educating Rita* as an ideological site of struggle, generating competing interpretations. She also refers to the protagonists of other (Pygmalion) movies (*Billy Elliot*, *Pretty Woman*) to make her point.

Finally, this first analysis of our data showed unmistakably that many of our students could identify with the literacy narrative as represented in *Educating Rita*, which was proven by very telling anecdotes from the students' personal narratives. By asking them to link the movie to their own stories, students were forced to reflect on the matter from their own perspective by which they gained incidental insight into the issues under scrutiny. Several students put their own academic training into perspective or emphasized their own struggle to become 'bi-Discoursal':

Watching the film, I could easily identify with Rita. I come from a family with parents without any formal education. In my family, I'm the first one to study at a university. So, I'm also the first to work my way into the academic culture, with its own specific codes. In short: another Discourse. Not seldom, this is causing ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, I learn to see the world in a different, broader perspective. On the other hand, I sometimes feel rootless, neither fish nor flesh. Sometimes, my new way of thinking is completely at

odds with the way my family is looking at certain issues. And this leads to a sense of being misunderstood or even to painful conflicts. So, it is not difficult for me to understand Rita's internal conflict in the movie.

Another student refers to her inner circle to reflect additionally on the issue of 'a better song' versus 'a different song':

Thinking about my 'mixed' circle of friends (ranging from merely professional training to university degrees), I notice that those without a higher education are often more uncomplicated people. A lot of them attach great importance to certain values. I think that we can also find this in Rita's case. At first, she is uneducated, but she has a goal in life, wants to succeed and is honest to Frank about what she thinks and feels. To put it somewhat black-and-white: Rita represents an ordinary, sincere manner of living. ... By contrast, Frank is living in a world of appearances and sneakiness.

This somewhat romanticized vision on the 'honest' nature of the uneducated is well represented in the minds of our university students.

At this stage, the socio-economic background of our students fell outside the scope of this research. We are well aware, however, that it could be interesting to inquire further into the relation(s) between the students' social positions and their conflicting ways of reading *Educating Rita*. This could be an intriguing question to consider in continuing research.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate the existence of a powerful 'Pygmalion template', circulating in contemporary cinematic culture. In defining (the) literacy (myth), we adopted a broad, Discourses-oriented view on this problematic concept. By focusing on a Discourse or culture clash, Pygmalion movies problematize the ideological implications of literacy and the ways that literacy acquisition affects the formation of identity. The deep structure of these movies usually consists in the same binary oppositions, in which 'high' and 'low', 'dominant' and 'non-mainstream' are contrasted. The symbolic resolution or mediation offered to these problematic dichotomies represented in a Pygmalion movie varies from one movie to another. We found that most Pygmalion movies may be considered as ideological sites of struggle that simultaneously contribute to the construction and to the deconstruction of the literacy myth in contemporary movie culture.

Our narrative research showed that these popular movies have the potential to function as critical 'teaching machines'. We have tried to demonstrate this potential by creating a curriculum as a contact zone in which films are used as a primary source of knowledge and insight together with students' personal narratives, theoretical readings, and students' own movie analyses and interpretations. In response to screenings of the movies *My Fair Lady* and *Educating Rita*, students were asked both to interpret and debate five key sequences in on-line discussion groups. Our exploratory study, based on an analysis of some part of these materials, revealed contradictory and insightful interpretations of the representation of (the) literacy (myth). We learned that discussing the movie *Educating Rita* deepened our students' understanding of the problematic nature of literacy acquisition and Discourse or culture

clashes. Moreover, we thought that students gained confidence in their own visual literacy by successfully conducting a narrative analysis of a movie, focusing on binary oppositions. Visual and cultural literacy were also enhanced by a growing awareness of the Pygmalion template in movie culture, as was often demonstrated by our students' original movie choices and by their movie references in the discussion groups.

In addition, students seemed to care about what was being taught, as was seen in the willingness to share their personal narratives in on-line discussion groups. Most importantly, uniting different kinds of representation (film, theory, and student interpretations and narratives) caused a very instructive struggle over meaning which was thematized in the curriculum as contact zone.

Notes

1. Gee (1996: 137) describes 'secondary Discourses' as 'those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization'. According to Gee (1996: 132), 'dominant Discourses' are those 'that lead to social goods in a society'.
2. See Soetaert *et al.* (2004).
3. See e.g. Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett (1992), Alvermann *et al.* (1999), Buckingham (1990, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2003), Lusted (1991), and Masterman (1985).
4. This cross-over is in some way a restoration of the old bond that existed between these fields, as shown in the work of the founding fathers of cultural studies: Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. Indications for a 'new' interest in the intersection of two fields that for decades remained largely disconnected, can be found in the publication of special issues of leading journals (e.g. Maton and Wright 2002, Gaztambide-Fernández and Gruner 2003). We can also point to Giroux and Shannon (1997), as well as to the proliferation of Cultural Studies in Education programmes at US, UK, and Australian universities.
5. In this sense, Giroux's position is close to that of hooks's view on film: 'It has only been in the last ten years or so that I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read' (hooks, in Giroux 2002: 9).
6. Trier (2001: 301) defines a school film as 'a movie that in some way—even incidentally—is about an educator or a student'.
7. Details of movies discussed in this paper are listed in a filmography following the reference list.
8. See, in particular, Bloom (1987).
9. We also want to mention here the work of Keroes (1999), especially her revealing paper on *Educating Rita* (Gilbert 1983), to which we will return later.
10. In later versions the statue brought to life is named Galatea.
11. Director George Cukor already played on a similar theme in his movie *Born Yesterday* (1950). This movie however proved to be far less influential than *My Fair Lady*. The same can be said of the early 1938 *Pygmalion* screen adaptation. Clear examples of Pygmalion movies are *Educating Rita* (Gilbert 1983), *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990), *Nikita* (Besson 1990), *Six Degrees of Separation* (Schepisi 1993), *She's All That* (Iscoffe 1999), *Small Time Crooks* (Allen 2000), *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie 2000), and *The Shape of Things* (LaBute 2003). Furthermore, elements of the Pygmalion template may be recognized in some science fiction movies, such as *Bicentennial Man* (Columbus 1999), *Artificial Intelligence: A. I.* (Spielberg 2001), and *S1m0ne* (Niccol 2002).
12. See Ford and Mitchell (2004).
13. We would like to recall that when speaking about the literacy myth, we use the broad interpretation of literacy by James Gee mentioned earlier. In this way, the literacy myth

- could be rephrased as the easy and unfounded assumption that mastering a (dominant) secondary Discourse in society will lead to individual improvement (among other things).
14. Data were collected during the academic year 2005–2006 (123 students were enrolled in the course and the entire exercise lasted one term).
 15. Original extracts in Dutch have been translated by Ive Verdoodt.

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