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Penultimate Draft of

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In the 1998 Iranian film *The Apple* a social worker makes a home visit after neighbours raise concerns about the welfare of two sisters. She discovers a pair of eleven-year-old twins who have never been outside their house, not even to play in their own walled yard. The girls' blind, self-isolating mother seems to condone, perhaps even need, her unemployed husband's practice of keeping their daughters locked inside 'for their own safety'. The film is about what happens when the social worker engages with the family. Thematically it is about education: What is it? What is it for? Who is it for? Why is it valuable? How might you pursue, facilitate or deny an education? Can education be separated from life? Are we all continually learning from and teaching each other? Does a willingness to learn and/or to teach require courage or fearlessness? And so on.

The Apple, co-written by director Samira Makhmalbaf and her filmmaker-teacher father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, is one of several emblematic films which, according to Alexis Gibbs, help us *see* education. These films, including Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* and her *At Five in the Afternoon*, Louis Malle's *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, Rossellini's neo-realist war trilogy, Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home?* Ryan Fleck's *Half-Nelson*, and Jean Vigo's *Zéro du Conduite*, investigate and help us see anew some of the many, varied, and complex features that contribute to our concept of education. In so doing, they demonstrate the redundancy of seeking an essentialist account of its nature. As such, these films have an important role to play in illuminating education in ways that might otherwise be clouded or even obstructed by the activities of seeking definitions and scientific theorising. In other words, according to Gibbs, these films can re-educate us about education.

Moreover, in articulating our encounters with and understanding of what these films help us see, our re-education about education develops our aesthetic sensibility. Indeed, our engaged viewing and post-viewing discussions of such films is, Gibbs proposes, a matter of ‘conceptual aesthetics’.

In *Seeing Education on Film: A Conceptual Aesthetics*, Gibbs takes his philosophical cues not only from the films themselves, but also from the philosophical preoccupations and insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell and, to a lesser but illuminating extent, Friedrich Schiller, D. N. Rodowick, and Sandra Laugier. From (the later) Wittgenstein, Gibbs avails himself of the notion of *aspect blindness*: one of the consequences of being held in the grip of a picture that limits our ability to see things anew or in a different way. One example of such a picture is that framed by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, namely that the so-called ‘Male Gaze’ is all-pervasive in Hollywood or mainstream films.¹ Assuming the exceptionless truth of Mulvey’s proposal not only risks blinding us to seeing other things in such films, but also it can actually prevent, even prohibit such encounters. Being in thrall to what Gibbs calls Mulvey’s “‘*explanatory gaze*’” (p. 42) is itself a potential consequence of being in the grip of the kind of limiting theoretical preoccupations that both Wittgenstein and Cavell challenge. On their view, to better understand our conceptual landscape what is needed is description not explanation.

Echoing Cavell’s recognition of a group of educationally preoccupied and illuminating ‘remarriage comedies’, Gibbs goes one step further and identifies a number of films as ‘re-education dramas’. Where Cavell’s family of films are importantly linked to a genre, Gibbs’s are not. Where Cavell’s focus is primarily on the re-education of the female protagonists of the comedies, Gibbs’s preoccupation is with the re-education of the viewers rather than the on-screen characters. For him, what is particularly rewarding about these films are the lessons they offer about humanity rather than insights into the particular individuals embroiled in the detail of film’s narrative substance and momentum. Where Cavell’s comedies are Hollywood classics, Gibbs’s selection embraces a broader range of narrative and dramatic options, many of which do not aim for the kind of character development and narrative closure standardly pursued in mainstream productions. Gibbs’s re-education dramas offer a range of diverse investigations into aspects of childhood, the pupil/teacher relationship, the relationships between pupils, the relevance (or otherwise) of the physicality of schools and classrooms, etc. Gibbs also contrasts his *re-education* dramas with a number of more familiar (merely) *education* dramas which he takes as presenting more circumscribed explorations of education. Typical of this latter genre is the trope of the emancipatory teacher

who changes the life of one or more pupils. Unlike such education films as *Dead Poet's Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Sister Act II*, re-education dramas embrace a 'cinematic realism' capable of providing the viewer with access to reality, rather than what Gibbs characterises as artificial or sentimental simulacra. The main problem with (mere) education films is not that they are not well-made and entertaining but rather that they consolidate and perpetuate a narrow range of education-related preoccupations. The gifted teacher in unlikely or challenging circumstances, while not exhausting the focus of these films, does dominate and thus limit the filmic exploration of the subject. For Gibbs, such films are unlikely to assist viewers to expand their appreciation of what education is and might be. In contrast to the re-education dramas of Samira Makhmalbaf, which are given a welcome chapter of their own, education films provide answers rather than raise questions. Unlike Makhmalbaf, their authors are not, as Gibbs proposes, educationalists in their own right.

In a postscript, Gibbs argues that re-education films have a further pedagogical value; namely, in providing the material and rationale for post-viewing discussions that can lead to students (of education) finding and developing their own voices and improving their skills at cinematic criticism. In eschewing 'Theory' and a commitment to an explanatory gaze, Gibbs's own students of education are regularly required to ruminate on and respond to what they are witnessing. In so doing they come to recognise that the resources for articulating their observations and thoughts are not to be plucked from some hidden Cartesian realm, but are located in and through the ordinary language they share with others. Moreover, as their ordinary language skills develop, so does their ability to discern, refine, and nuance their growing appreciation of the expanding range of activities, goals, viewpoints and questions that constitute and contribute to the concept of education.

Gibbs's first monograph is directed at educationalists, teachers, and philosophers of education but there is genuine potential for interdisciplinary interest. For anyone involved in film studies there is the fascinating challenge to the very notion of Theory, along with a potentially new notion of cinematic realism, and a not-unrelated celebration of the precision of ordinary language. For philosophers of art concerned with the so-called 'cognitive value' of fiction, there are numerous epistemically relevant resources for expanding ongoing debates. For those philosophers of art and film concerned with the ontology of art works, Gibbs offers a number of meta-philosophical challenges to their 'picture' of realist metaphysics. For those pursuing ways of doing philosophy of film *without theory*, it is exciting to see an example of work that shares a similar meta-philosophical orientation. Inevitably, the flipside of ambitious interdisciplinarity is that it may sate no reader and

frustrate many, but Gibbs's target readership should find plenty to engage with, not least the tremendous viewing list of re-education dramas which is a gift to anyone looking to break free from the limited and repetitious nature of education films.

That said, does Gibbs's Wittgensteinian injunction to 'look, don't think' – meaning to watch without watching *for* the confirmation of one's theoretical presumptions – require the authority of Wittgenstein, in order to be of value? Does one have to agree – as Gibbs seems to – with Cavell's commitment to the supposed 'truth in skepticism' and the questionable 'disappointment with criteria' in order to value Cavell's recognition that films can be a form of education for grown-ups? It remains unclear the extent to which Gibbs's key ideas require the philosophical underpinnings he champions, or if the latter are to be understood as non- or a-theoretical complements. For if engaging with re-education dramas can indeed do what Gibbs argues for then what function do his philosophical touchstones provide?

To what extent does a film have to be thought of as engaging in 'conceptual investigations' as opposed to simply (though not simplistically) *exploring themes* that touch on all aspects of education: expanding our ideas of who teachers are, what they do and what they need; challenging our preconceptions of what learning is; and assembling reminders of the indefinite ways of being a child and experiencing childhood. A lot of weight is put on the notion of the 'concept', not least when Gibbs contrasts conceptual with 'characterful' (p. 124). Perhaps by following his own suggestion to embrace the ability of ordinary language to finesse what we mean, there is a way of avoiding turning 'concept' into an overworked term of art that then cries out for its own philosophical investigation. Ditto 'aesthetics'. Finally, some minor editorial issues. The index is patchy, failing, for example to list all the films mentioned. Proofing is not as thorough as one would expect, and my first attempt to pursue a reference failed. There is much more to be said, and challenged, about Gibbs's Cavell-inspired Cartesian-slanted understanding of *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* but that must wait for another occasion. Until then, it is to be noted that Longfellow Deeds is played by the magnificent Gary Cooper and not James Stewart, who was in the near-sequel *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, also directed by Frank Capra.

Gibbs's *Seeing Education on Film: A Conceptual Aesthetics* throws open the intellectual and philosophical doors to some of the most shining examples and achievements of cinematic realism. In the films he selects we encounter eye- and mind-opening presentations of our singular human form of life, in just a few of its indefinitely varied manifestations. Not only does this book deserve a large readership but the re-education dramas Gibbs identifies deserve repeated exploration by anyone who holds the value of

education-related issues as beyond doubt. Those who remain sceptical about that value, are in the grip of a picture.

ⁱ Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen* 16(3). pp. 6-18.