

## Broader reflection

# A pedagogy of contagion

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## Abstract

In this essay Alain Bergala, one of the co-founders of *Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse* (CCAJ) reflects on thirty years of the film education project, exploring its distinctive pedagogy rooted in community, shared cinematic references and intergenerational exchange. Bergala argues that true film education emerges not from programmes which privilege metrics and evaluation or outcome-based frameworks, but through the 'contagion' of taste, memory and lived encounters with cinema. Drawing on experiences with filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Chantal Akerman and Agnès Varda, he highlights the transformative potential of films that resist easy assimilation, enabling participants to discover cinema as 'their thing' – a personal compass, cultural inheritance and enduring source of creative identity.

**Keywords** *Le cinéma de cent ans de jeunesse*; film education; Abbas Kiarostami; Agnès Varda; Chantal Akerman

*For the Film Education Journal's edition dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the film education project 'Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse' (CCAJ) we asked one of its founders and its conceptual leading figure, Alain Bergala, to write an essay on this long-term pedagogical experience. To find more details on the frame of the project, please consult the editorial of this issue.*

The CCAJ has never been just another 'educational framework' among others, but rather defined its difference by operating at every level as a community. A community has nothing whatsoever in common with the purely vertical transmission of knowledge, and even less with a 'customer base'.

This difference derives primarily from one of our basic principles: adult participants meet in person at least twice a year. First during the introductory workshops, where the film clips intended to inform the approach to the year's topic in the classroom are collectively screened and discussed. Then at the end of the academic year, where the adults and younger participants come together to watch the films they have created around the world during the year and discuss each of them with the respective filmmakers. In the middle of the year, midterm meetings are also opportunities to meet up, more locally, to take stock of what has happened in the first half of the year, before moving on to the production phase.

Even the most diligently prepared online meetings will never be sufficient to build a community. Remote meetings via computer screen may allow for the exchange of ideas and work protocols, but the sharing is not the same. The session's imprint on participants' minds will remain abstract and intellectual. This is especially true given that participants can leave the meeting whenever they want, which is the opposite of 'participating' for even an hour in a real community. Genuine, meaningful exchange also emerges through eye contact, gestures, physical presence and informal exchanges during breaks in the meeting. In short, through the contagious element that shapes our understanding of knowledge-sharing.

As demand has grown over time from classes and schools wishing to take part in CCAJ workshops, we could have chosen to expand, to welcome more and more classes, and thus enter the race for measurable output that supervising institutions and financing bodies always appreciate. The number of 'children impacted', as those same institutions like to put it, has never been for us a criterion of a job well done. Our main concern is what happens inside the minds and emotions of each participant, and what they gain from this experience.

We made a different, more demanding choice: to broaden our reach to other countries, other social environments and other film cultures, while rejecting any form of quantitative inflation. Not to expand for the sake of expanding, but to bring our experiences and questions into contact with those of other lifestyles, other countries, other cultures and other ways of thinking about cinema.

There has always been a direct tiling – I am tempted to say through contagion – between those who had been part of the community for years and those who had just entered it. This learning through contact exceeds mere exposure to ideas through the sole channel of knowledge and the pedagogical superego. We all know that direct contagion has always been decisive in what has shaped us: adults, the conveyors of knowledge, also pass on their tastes and intimate relationships to the films. Education is never simply transitive and functional. We always, and inevitably, teach what we are.

A community is woven not only around shared ideas but also around a certain imaginary of cinema, through the shared experience of a select number of films. At the CCAJ, a number of films recur among the chosen excerpts over the years, even if they were initially selected for their relevance to a year's specific theme. The primary explanation for this is that the films that are important to us in the history of cinema are not narrow or univocal, but works that traverse and engage with multiple subjects at once. Their status is not that of a mere 'good example' for pedagogical purposes, but that of genuine artistic creation. It is the nature of great films that they weave together multiple figures and motifs, and that they interrogate in their own way the universal parameters of cinema and its memory. The recurrence of certain films over 30 years has allowed a shared culture of cinema to take shape – not because of a programmatic didacticism, but because of the overlapping between the adult participants who have been part of the initiative for years and those who are just entering it. Of course, it comes from the film culture and tastes of those who run and animate the project, and also of those – myself included – who started it. One of the foremost and essential requirements of this choice is the value of the creative work embodied in these films.

Even if our goal has never been cultural capitalisation, it is important that over the years an imaginary mini-museum of cinema has been created, shared by both the adult and younger participants in the CCAJ. Learning about western pictorial art would make no sense if it did not include discovering works by Giotto,

Delacroix, Cézanne, Matisse, Bonnard and Picasso. The point is not to teach an academic history of art or cinema, but what would learning about cinema mean without the anchoring of shared film-objects in the participants' memories? The issue of the gap between the culture of the adults and of the younger generations regularly arises when discussing pedagogy. I have never believed that we should prioritise films that the younger participants already know, or that belong to their generational film culture, or which would correspond to their age group. Nor that we should select films 'at their level' so as not to discourage them. My conviction is that in pedagogy we should not be afraid to lose students in the weeds so to speak, since while there they may find seeds that will sprout later on. This is a lesson in humility: it is sometimes only years later, by chance, that we discover what truly took root in the mind and emotional memory of someone who encountered cinema with us at a given moment, and what they have done with it in their life.

The films that leave a lasting mark aren't necessarily those that are immediately and fully assimilated without effort or zones of opacity. Those are often quickly forgotten, even if we experienced great pleasure at the time of viewing. The ones that leave a mark, those that we think about again and again, that end up inhabiting us, even inspiring us, are often slightly out of sync with prevailing codes and our familiar film culture. The films that resist us are often those that shape us.

The question of the past is at the core of all artistic education. Demagoguery would dictate minimising the films from cinema's past in order to show mainly recent works, supposedly closer to the lived experience of the younger generations. The role of a true cinema education is to enable the new generation we are addressing to create a link between the cinema most contemporary to them, and the past from which it is made. Pavese wrote in his journal (*The Burning Brand*) on 18 August 1947 that:

A work settles nothing, just as the labor of a whole generation settles nothing. Sons, and the morrow, always start afresh, light-heartedly ignoring their fathers and what has already been done. Even hatred, a revolt against the past, is more tolerable than this bland indifference. [...] Because the richness of a work – of a generation – is always determined by how much of the past it contains. (Pavese, 1961, pp. 311–12)

One of the fundamental choices of our method is to propose from the beginning of the year, to all participants whatever their level or nationality, a collection of film clips that allow for a very free approach to the year's theme. This set of films contributes to the building of a community of references. A community of references does not mean a syllabus, nor outcome-based education. In the first phase, this collection of excerpts allows the learners to establish links between the films and the film excerpts that they have been given to watch. What will ultimately stick in the students' minds are these links that they have made themselves, individually at first, before any form of vertical transmission of knowledge. The comparative approach, for which I have long advocated and worked, remains for me the most 'open-ended'.

When, at the end of the CCAJ year, the groups present the films that they have created around the chosen theme, the adults are often surprised to hear that, when shooting a particular scene, the participants had in mind a particular excerpt from Robert Bresson or Johan van der Keuken.

At their age, they would never have encountered *Mouchette*, *Au hasard Balthazar*, nor even *Beppie* or *Where Is the Friend's House?* in their 'normal' social trajectory. The question is not so much quotation nor imitation, but the deep assimilation of a piece of cinema that touched them and allowed them – at least some of them – to encounter their own desire for cinema, and to carve out their own creative gesture.

A community devoted to the cultural transmission of cinema cannot remain closed off from those that make it: working filmmakers. The symbolic status of filmmaker is such that many among them have only a polite and distant interest in the very idea of cultural transmission. For some, the idea of pedagogical practice is even somewhat wounding to the artistic status that they claim. For them, what is at stake is their own genius, and genius is a gift that cannot be transmitted. I encountered many, during my two years at the Ministry of Education,<sup>1</sup> who expressed nothing but condescension, even barely concealed contempt, towards the very idea of a pedagogy of cinema. It was as if it was an affront to their creativity. Their argument was always the same: 'artistic creation cannot be taught'. As if they needed to safeguard their

secret treasure as creators by jealously ensuring that nothing of it be passed on to others. In his classes at university, Rohmer would start from a much more generous conviction: creativity cannot be taught, but one can explore its methods by studying the choices of the filmmaker. He would screen a scene from one of his films and describe in concrete details all the choices that he himself had made: choice of actors, technical choices, set choices, choice of colours, creative choices, tactical and strategic choices, etc.

I personally had the great fortune to take part, as a friend, on several occasions in an experience that greatly expanded my conception of what it means to teach cinema: workshops run by Abbas Kiarostami. Even after his international recognition as a major filmmaker, he never stopped this pedagogical activity to which he devoted a lot of time and energy throughout his life, with great passion. Everywhere he travelled in the world, he would ask that a filmmaking workshop be organised for him, lasting at least a week. He ran hundreds of them. For him, this was not time stolen that could have been spent on his own creations; each time it was an opportunity to become a 'non-professional' again, to look at cinema anew with the eyes of a neophyte, to be, as he put it, a 'learner'. He would begin his workshops by telling his students: 'I will teach you nothing'. And when I once asked him about his method, he replied: 'They need to start the movement, to accomplish their own journey, all that I can do is to make sure that they don't lose track of their personal path'.

His workshops brought together diverse groups of cinephiles and aspiring filmmakers, each working with the material they had brought themselves, and Kiarostami discouraged all technical obsessiveness, praising a 'poor' cinema stripped of all rhetoric. I heard him say to the learners: 'Cinema is what happens in the mind, technique is secondary; without ideas cinema does not exist'. His pedagogy echoed Renoir's idea that cinema is the idea *and* the concrete detail, and the avoidance of all intermediary management between the two. One of his critiques during the final screenings was that some films were 'too professional'. To high school students in Sarlat, he suggested simplifying their edit: '20 shots are far too many, why not just one?'. He urged his learners to always tend towards simplification, towards purification, towards a Bressonian ideal, in contrast to the far more sinuous narratives of his own films.

Kiarostami was bound by none of the principles that make up our pedagogical ethos. This difference obviously stemmed from his symbolic status as 'master', since the participants had signed up based on his name and their esteem for his cinema. He could sometimes be unfair in his unequal treatment of the learners, depending on whether their attitude inspired his personal sympathy or not. He was sometimes unjust or even in bad faith when he evaluated the finished films. He gave himself the right, when attending the shoot of a scene, to take the camera and film a shot himself without offering any explanation to the filmmaker, who was free to integrate the shot in the edit or not, but who was often left unsettled by this enigmatic gesture. The dogmatic valorisation of non-intervention on the part of the adult, which leads to the often-heard phrase before screenings of films by young people – 'the students did everything themselves' – was completely foreign to his pedagogical philosophy. Sometimes, he would even make a whole film himself, using as a starting point the framework he had proposed to the students. This happened in Cuba, in 2016, where he shot and directed a film titled *Pasajera* during the workshop, probably the last film he completed with his own hands. He never included these films in his filmography, even though they were conceived and shot by him.

There are other examples, more closely related to CCAJ – as their godfathers and godmothers. Even though she entered the profession as an autodidact – far more 'wildly' than the other filmmakers of the New Wave – Agnès Varda remained all her life deeply committed to the cultural transmission of cinema, and was a loyal and steadfast collaborator in our pedagogical activities. Nicolas Philbert and Claire Simon, for whom education and childhood have often been central themes of their films, have always turned up whenever we have called on them. Mattheu Amalric and other filmmakers, like Thomas Salvador and Dominique Cabrera, have become long-standing companions of our community over the years. Nobuhiro Suwa, a major Japanese filmmaker, has been more than a companion: for years he concretely led the CCAJ workshops in Japan. I had the opportunity to film him while he was leading a workshop in Tokyo. Others, such as Wim Wenders or the Larrieu brothers, have come to visit us occasionally, taking the time to understand our approach, to watch the films made during the workshops, and to discuss with those who had made them.

Every democratic pedagogy aims, in principle, for a collective effectiveness, with the same objectives for everyone. This aim is paramount, indisputably the priority, and must remain the foundation of any educational undertaking. However, it must not censor nor suppress those rarer side effects that we always encounter sooner or later when attempting to transmit a love of art. At university, I could quickly spot in the beginning of the year the students who were going to be 'good pupils', those who would quickly and effectively assimilate the knowledge I was trying to impart about cinema, a given film, a particular director or whatever cinematic issue. But I always paid close attention to those who were less 'academic', or more reserved, but in whom I could sense a certain fervour and suspected that some would turn their relationship with cinema into something deeply their own. Those for whom the classes had allowed them to discover that cinema was 'their' thing.

I have always thought that one of the most beautiful goals of an initiation to cinema should be to give some young people the opportunity to make this discovery. In the formation of an individual, that person comes into contact throughout their studies with disciplines and knowledge that are objectively important for their future social life. This intergenerational passing on of a shared cultural baggage that is supposed to constitute a toolkit for their future life as adults and citizens concerns everybody. A learner's academic results evaluate their ability to integrate this knowledge and culture that their generation must inherit.

But along the way, some individuals sometimes experience the revelation that one of the subjects that they are learning about responds to a more intimate personal need, to a desire they perhaps didn't even know that they had, and they discover that they have just encountered 'their' thing. The one that will help them build their singular identity, and which will be for them a refuge and a compass. Cinema is very much suited to this experience of someone realising, one day, that they have encountered their thing. Because cinema is open to everyone and demands no entry fee of prior knowledge: each of us can one day feel that a film is speaking to them personally. Or that a film is announcing to them privately something about their own becoming, not yet fully clear to themselves.

One of Dino Risi's first films from 1950, a ten-minute short titled *Buio in sala* (I 1950), told the story of a travelling salesman, a poor depressed wretch wandering through war-bombed Milan, who ends up entering into a cinema showing a western. He comes out comforted, stronger, more confident and reassured about his own self. Risi said that cinema was a 'teacher of life' (transl. *maestro di vita*). The precious aspect of a personal journey is the encounter in one moment with the thing that will become constitutive of one's inner identity.

For other young people, this encounter will be with music or with literature, which does not mean they will become musicians or authors. The question here is not vocation, even if sometimes the said encounter can lead to one. But this intimate encounter with cinema means that they will have in their lives something that will be their thing and that will in some way protect them when they need reassurance or consolation. Something which will keep alive their curiosity and their desire for cinema, both the films that come out week after week, and those from the past. No voluntarist pedagogy can programme in advance this election of a 'thing' by a subject. But cinema is an art that is particularly conducive to these existential encounters which sometimes occur within an instant. One only needs the occasion and the right circumstances.

A French filmmaker who recently passed away, Sophie Fillières, had the revelation of what she wanted to do with her life at the age of 16. It was in a cinema, where she was watching, with her parents, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (*Every Man for Himself*, Jean-Luc Godard, F 1980). When she recalls the profound impact that screening had on her, she mentions neither the film's subject, nor its script, nor even the actors, but the sudden, striking discovery of this truth: that cinema is simply about 'showing things in one way and not another', and this is what she wanted to do (Nicklaus, 2000). The radicality of Godard's creative gesture was for her a revelation that determined her future. 'And from that moment on', she says, 'I kept repeating to myself that I would become a filmmaker. That film really illuminated me. I often wonder what I would have done if I hadn't seen it' (Nicklaus, 2000).

Chantal Akerman discovered at 15 that her 'thing' was cinema. She describes this moment of revelation in an interview (Criterion, 2012):

When I went to the cinema I would go see *La grande vadrouille* or Walt Disney movies. It was just to have a good time, to go out with friends, have some ice cream, but certainly not to be shaken up emotionally or to see a work of art. I didn't know a film could be a work of art. So I walked into the film because I liked the title, *Pierrot le fou* (*Pierrot the Fool*). And I saw that film, and it was so completely other, so different. I felt like it was talking to me directly, that it was poetry. Since before I wanted to make films I had always wanted to write, I felt in this film something that was similar to great pieces of writing. But from another angle, and I found that other angle even more fascinating at the time. And so I walked out of the cinema and I said: I want to make films too.

Translated from French by Charlie Hewison.

## Note

1. Alain Bergala was advisor for film education in the context of French cultural minister Jack Lang's art education programme 'Les arts à l'école' in 2000–2002.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author was one of the co-founders and leading figures of *Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

## Filmography

*Au hasard Balthazar* (*Balthazar*) (F 1966, Robert Bresson)

*Beppie* (NL 1965, Johan van der Keuken)

*Buio in sala* (*Lights Out in the Cinema Hall*) (I 1950, Dino Risi)

*La Grande Vadrouille* (*Don't Look Now... We're Being Shot At!*) (F 1966, Gérard Oury, with Louis de Funès)

*Mouchette* (F 1967, Robert Bresson)

*Pasajera* (*The Passenger*) (IR 2016, Abbas Kiarostami)

*Pierrot le fou* (*Pierrot the Fool*) (F 1965, Jean-Luc Godard)

*Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (*Every Man for Himself*) (F 1980, Jean-Luc Godard)

*Where Is the Friend's House?* (IR 1987, Abbas Kiarostami)

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