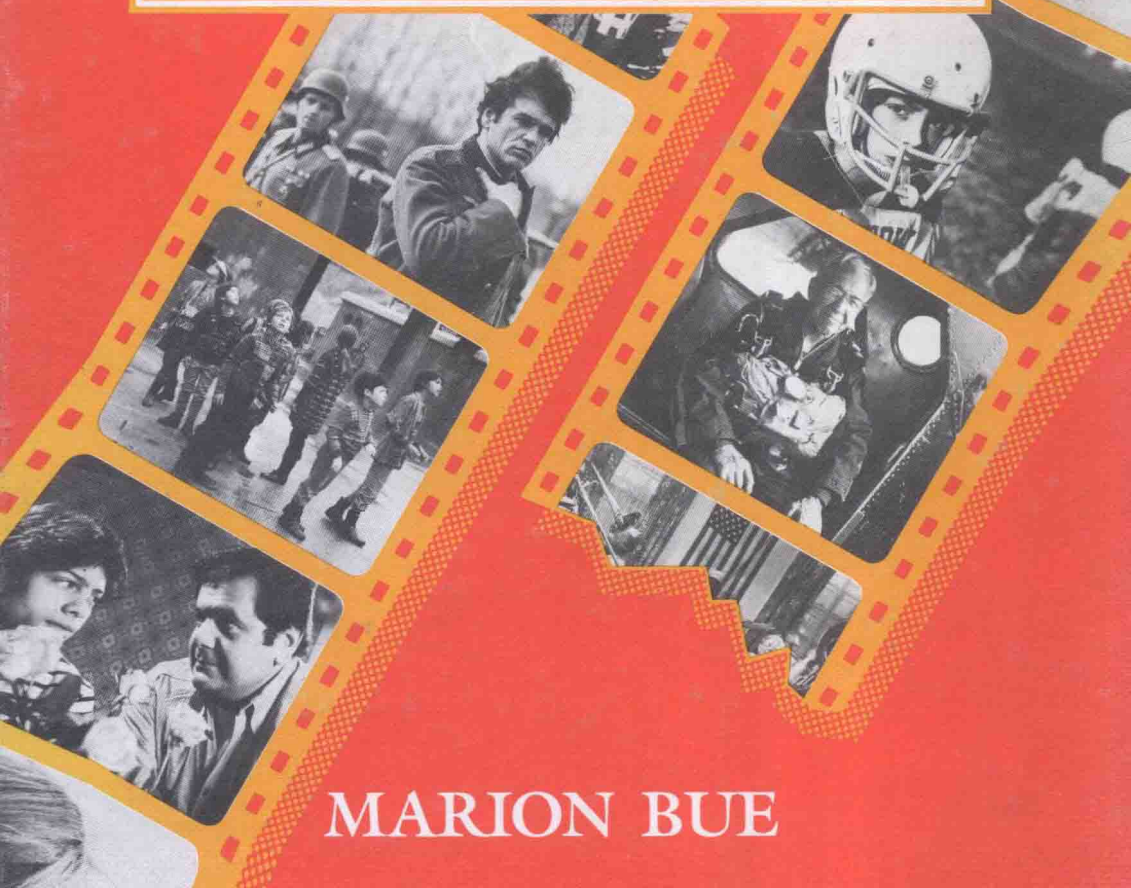


Turning MIRRORS *Into* WINDOWS

TEACHING THE
BEST SHORT FILMS



MARION BUE

***Turning Mirrors
into
Windows***

Teaching the Best Short Films

Marion Bue

1984
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Littleton, Colorado

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Most people are mirrors, merely reflecting the mood and emotions of the times; few are windows bringing light to bear on the dark corners, where troubles fester; and the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.

—Sydney J. Harris
Pieces of Silver

Foreword

On the day that I decided to quit teaching, I was convinced not to quit by a woman I call a miracle worker. Her name is Marion Bue, and I am delighted to be writing the foreword to her book. If the truth be known, I requested the privilege and am honored that she granted it to me. The reasons are many. Aside from saving my teaching career, Ms. Bue introduced me to the world of film and to the joys of teaching through media. Nowhere in my professional training was I introduced to a more successful teaching tool. In one evening, she planted seeds that continue to grow.

Her idea is simple enough—good films taught by good teachers bring great results. Why is it that so few people know that? One reason is that few people have been shown the way. This manuscript fills this tremendous need. You will be introduced to the best films available to you and to the best methods to teach them, presented by the best teacher I have ever had.

Welcome to the magical thoughts of Marion Bue. May they make your life in education as rewarding as they have made mine.

— John Matoian
Director of Development
Scholastic Productions
New York, New York

Preface

The function of the language arts program of the secondary school is to develop and refine the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The school itself, however, has much larger tasks: to transmit the cultural heritage, to help students live in a world whose only constant is change, and to develop concerned citizens who will make informed and compassionate decisions.

Time is growing short. McLuhan's vision of the global village is here. The actions of one country affect everyone. Nuclear annihilation and terrorism threaten, human rights are nonexistent in many countries, millions of people are unemployed and homeless, while others die of starvation and unclean water. National economies falter, crime escalates, thousands drop out with drugs and alcohol, yet in the United States only 53.9 percent of the eligible voters voted in the last national election.

The problems are staggering, but they are not insoluble. There is an urgent need for understanding, for information, for skills in interpersonal and international relationships, and for the will to *act*. It is to teachers who care about these needs, as well as about literacy, that I direct this book because film can be their most important ally.

For many secondary students, high school is terminal. It is the last chance for education to challenge young minds. Film, the most powerful medium in the world, is awesome in its ability to change thinking and behavior. It has no peer in its power to impart concepts, ideas, and information quickly, interestingly, and, if it is well crafted, indelibly. The problem for the educator is: Of the thousands of films available, how can I find the ones that meet the needs of my class as I perceive them? How can I be sure that the information is accurate, that it is the best film available on the subject, and most of all, that it will help my students survive in the twenty-first century?

This book is organized to make that task as easy as possible. The first two chapters contain essential background information on the use of film in the classroom. Chapter 3, *Using Specific Films*, contains synopses of a number of films with suggestions for activities before and after viewing. The films were chosen because they most easily illustrate the variety of academic approaches and teaching techniques available to teachers who use film. This section also contains related materials in literature, poetry, and film. Reviews of more films appear in the next chapter, *Film Reviews*. The activities suggested in

Using Specific Films are easily adaptable to these films. In many cases, the suggested related materials are also appropriate. Since space does not permit indepth treatment of all the fine films available, an annotated filmography is also included. In some cases these films have a more limited use because of their content or their academic level.

Pertinent purchasing or rental information is given for all films: the film's running time; *c* or *b & w* for color or black and white; the sales price, followed immediately by the rental price; the distributor; and the film's production date. Some films, especially feature-length ones, are not available for purchase and can only be leased or rented. In a very few cases, purchase prices are only available upon application to the distributor. Although price information is as accurate as possible, film prices do fluctuate, depending upon the number of films purchased, film company promotions, and other variables.

Several appendixes follow the text. Appendix A provides descriptions of selected film producers and distributors. Appendix B lists additional film distributors and Appendix C gives addresses of the film rental departments of colleges and universities. Many companies offer fine services to teachers; information, announcements of recent acquisitions, study suggestions, and, in some cases, teaching demonstrations. Teachers should not hesitate to write or phone them for catalogues and other information.

I hope that this book will encourage teachers to find and use the best films for their classes. Only by directing the power of the school system toward developing a literate and just society can we ensure that everyone will ultimately have an equal opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Acknowledgments

Synopses and critiques of the following have been excerpted from reviews written by the author for *Media & Methods* magazine.

An Acquired Taste
All Summer in a Day
Americas in Transition
Board and Care
Brooklyn Bridge
Can't It Be Anyone Else?
The Case of the Legless Veteran
Chillysmith Farm
Close Harmony
Coming of Age
The Cop and the Anthem
Crac
Crossbar
The Day after Trinity
David: A Portrait of a Retarded Youth
Directors at Work: The Director and
the Image
The Electric Grandmother
Equality
Family of Strangers
Football in America
Forever Young
From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in
China
Front Line
Harlan County, U.S.A.
A Helping Hand
If You Love This Planet
In Our Water
Itzhak Perlman: In My Case Music
Josie
Last Stronghold of the Eagles

Let There Be Light
The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter
Little Miseries
Marathon Woman: Miki Gorman
A Matter of Time
Myself, Yourself
No Maps on My Taps
No Place to Hide
Pardon Me for Living
Paul Robeson: Tribute to an Artist
Possum Living
Psychling
Public Enemy Number One
Quilts in Women's Lives
Remember Me
Rendezvous
Schoolboy Father
The Sky Is Gray
Soldier Girls
The Sorrows of Gin
Split Cherry Tree
Stages: Houseman Directs *Lear*
Stepping Out: The DeBolts Grow Up
The Sun Dagger
Survival Run
Travelling Hopefully
Vietnam Requiem
The Voyage of Odysseus
The Way of the Willow
The Weavers
The Willmar Eight
The Workplace Hustle

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1 THE NEW FILMS

Suppose that education was to learn of an entirely new resource—one with high student interest, that crossed many disciplines, that taught many things faster than traditional methods, that could inculcate generally accepted values, that increased understanding of the racial and political diversity of the world, that offered much-needed intellectual discipline, and could even be used to teach basic skills. Imagine a resource that offered challenging and informative experiences to the students even as it beguiled them. Education would rush to learn to use such a resource with maximum effectiveness.

Incredibly, it hasn't happened. Although properly chosen films, with teachers trained in their use, can do all of the above, and more, film companies today have no more share of the educational dollar than they had twenty-five years ago when their product was far less effective. Colleges and universities offer no teacher training in the use of short films, few school systems offer any in-depth help to teachers, and professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English still regard film only peripherally in the curriculum. School administrators, faced with budget cuts, emasculate or eliminate the most important resource they have other than teachers and books.

Why has this marvelous teaching tool been relegated to such unimportant status that today its existence seems threatened? To teachers who have seen firsthand the films' effectiveness, it is incomprehensible. The answer must be that the educational leadership—college professors, school superintendents, supervisors, and professional organizations—does not understand the potential of what can be called the *new* films as opposed to the *educational* or *curriculum* film with which everyone over twenty-five years old was indoctrinated.

What are the new films? What distinguishes them from the traditional educational film? How can we make the educational leadership aware of how it is depriving students by not making these superb films an important component of the instructional program?

The new films are made by filmmakers of creativity and integrity using the best techniques and production facilities available. Like good writers, these filmmakers pose questions, postulate answers, or speculate on the needs,

values, and concerns of society. But unlike writers, filmmakers receive little exposure. Their films are not reviewed in newspapers, popular magazines, or on television. Critiques of their work, if written at all, appear in specialized periodicals read by other filmmakers, media specialists, and film librarians. Commercial theaters seldom, if ever, show short films. The millions of viewers watching the Academy Awards each year may know that awards are given for four short films, but they are indifferent because they have no opportunity to see them.

The result of this neglect is that these filmmakers have had no forum to display their work other than public libraries or schools. Although business and cable television have recently begun to use these films, education still lags far behind. The educational leadership must understand that films reach far beyond the basic tasks of the schools. No student is excluded from film because of reading deficiencies, or a lack of verbal skills. Every student can participate in film despite low self-esteem and feelings of alienation. Before film, each student is truly equal. Through film students encounter the world as it is, a world of anxiety and violence, but also of beauty.

Through film we see individuals struggling, usually successfully, with physical and mental handicaps that would demoralize many of us. Films explore our fears about the threat of nuclear destruction and global war, about our self-concepts, and about our relationships with others. They reflect our fears of aging and of being friendless and alone.

Films recall incidents in our national history with the implication and hope that those who understand history will not be condemned to repeat it. They sharpen our awareness of threatening environmental problems, of bureaucratic indifference, and of the urgent need to concern ourselves with each other.

Films also show women as resourceful members of society—loving homemakers, capable blue-collar workers and executives, and artists of vision. Children enchant us with their beauty and innocence, musicians and dancers make us proud to be human beings, and people exhibit such incomparable grace under extraordinary pressures that the spirit is strengthened. All of the films help us to understand who we are and our possibilities for the future.

This book is a plea for education to set aside its bias toward print and to admit superb filmmakers to an equally honored status with fine writers. It is a plea for education to understand that basic skills can be taught while, at the same time, we nurture beauty, justice, compassion, and courage.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FILM

Administrators and teachers often have misconceptions about the use of film in the curriculum. Some misconceptions may have a partial basis in fact, but they are not necessarily accurate and need not exist if the school attached enough importance to film to change the conditions that give rise to them. The reasoning is circuitous. The misconceptions are used to justify the failure to give film its proper place in the curriculum; the failure makes the misconceptions appear to be true, which means that ... and so it goes, with students and teachers the real losers. Fortunately there are districts that have enlightened teachers and audiovisual directors to prove the misconceptions wrong, but without administrative support, their work is difficult and

time-consuming. Such forward-looking districts are rare because the misconceptions are unquestioned and considered immutable.

The most difficult one to refute is probably: *only lazy teachers use film*. Regardless of the energy and skill of the individual teacher, the old round lesson plan philosophy dies hard. It is probably true there are teachers who use film in a lazy way. They may even reinforce the round lesson plan thinking by saying, "I have an easy day today. I have a film." Or they may borrow films from other disciplines, or use films for which neither they nor their classes are prepared. They may turn on the film and then correct papers, not realizing how clearly they signal to the class the film's unimportance. A group of teachers showing a film may arrange long coffee breaks, do personal errands, or even leave school, something they would never do if the class work was more traditional. Of course they may truly be indolent, but they may also have never experienced the effectiveness of a properly chosen and supervised film presentation.

It has been my experience that most teachers are very interested in classroom materials that offer more effective instruction. Further, in nine years of teaching two classes a week for teachers in the use of short films, I learned that it was invariably the best teachers who were the first to see the potential of the new films in the classroom.

These secondary teachers developed imaginative lesson plans that students completed with enthusiasm and skill because the assignments were intrinsically interesting. These same teachers shared with their colleagues masterful student essays, short stories, poetry, film scripts, personal writing, and letters. Some reported that students were interested in reading about particular films.

Elementary teachers brought in stories, poems, and descriptive paragraphs, but they also brought songs, art work, and even fingerpainting. These were by no means lazy teachers. They were hardworking and creative people—quick to realize the potential of a film and willing to invest the time necessary for an effective presentation and follow-up.

Perhaps lazy teachers use film, but it is far more likely that these teachers do not understand the power of film because they have never been exposed to it, as a student or as a teacher. The problem is one of leadership. Because administrators have never seen the new films and do not understand their uses, they call such teachers lazy. This misconception can be used to cut or eliminate film budgets and to deny support personnel and in-service training to teachers. University teacher-training departments, themselves ignorant about short films, strengthen this misconception by failing to educate teachers about them.

The same lack of understanding of the instructional potential of film underlies another misconception: *film is a rainy day activity*. This is sometimes perpetuated by media specialists who know nothing of the new films. Some years ago I heard a media specialist who, after explaining the services of the media center to the faculty, said, "Oh, and by the way, if it's raining and you need something to do at the last minute, come down to the center. We have some good films that the local utilities company gave us."

The remark sounds innocuous, but it illustrates the dichotomy between educators who consider film a vital resource and those who relegate it to an inferior status. (That the films are propaganda for nuclear power was left unsaid.) To believe that a rainy day activity should be a film of undetermined