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Teaching Women's Filmmaking: Special Collection Introduction

Colleen B. Kennedy-Karpat, Bilkent University, Department of Communication and Design, Ankara, Türkiye, cbkennedykarpat@gmail.com

This introduction to the special collection on Teaching Women's Filmmaking contextualizes the contributions among recent work that examines classroom praxis and relevant innovations in film and media studies scholarship, such as videographic criticism and online publication. It considers three key components of building a course—what to study, how to run a classroom, and how to implement assessments—and discusses each area according to critical feminist pedagogies.

This special collection unpacks the question of how best to approach women's media(ted) labor in the classroom. Although teaching is central to academic work, for media scholars teaching has rarely been, in itself, the object of scholarly reflection and critique. In organizing the eponymous Teaching Women's Filmmaking conference, hosted virtually at Istanbul Bilgi University in April 2021, our aim was to invite our peers to share and reflect on their strategies, best practices, and past experiences when incorporating screen media made by, for, and with women. Additional impetus for the topic came from the pedagogical contingencies that the covid-19 pandemic brought to all levels of education, which gave fresh urgency to issues of academic praxis. These contingencies have also affected the dissemination of research; our conference was held entirely online, and the emergency shift to distance learning that marked many (wealthy, Western) institutions' response to the crisis only further exposed the inequalities and instability that are inherent to the current system. As the world tentatively shifts to a new phase of pandemic life, these recent lessons can help us reassess our course design and the infrastructural frameworks that influence our teaching while also determining who can (continue to) access the education we aim to provide. By assembling selected contributions to our conference, this special collection of *Open Screens* invites readers to continue the conversation; this introduction will contextualize the submitted work among recent and ongoing efforts to examine classroom praxis under the rapidly shifting conditions of film and media studies in the digital age.

Pedagogy in higher education has an established history of practitioners combining insights from their field of research with those gained in the classroom. Yet, as Paul McEwan (2014) notes, academic studies dedicated to film and media pedagogy are drastically few compared to core areas like math, languages, and literature. Against the long history of those fields, film studies – and its even younger cousin, media studies – stands as a newcomer to institutional education. And unlike math or writing, neither film nor media are incontrovertible staples of primary and secondary school subjects. Different national systems and even individual institutions have embraced screen media to varying degrees across different age groups, but as an academic discipline, film studies frames itself first and foremost around postsecondary institutions, whose profiles range from dedicated art schools, where creative practice is integral to the curriculum, to community colleges and universities that offer a blend of applied practice and critical theory.

Reflecting, perhaps, a new or at least a more firmly grounded confidence as a recognized field of inquiry, critical writing on media pedagogy has recently proliferated. Lucy Fischer and Patrice Petro's 2012 volume *Teaching Film* marks a transition point between pre-digital and post-digital outlooks on film studies education, as

the subsequent rise of streaming video and the ever-widening accessibility of DIY videographic technologies on smartphones, tablets, and personal computers has opened up new possibilities for creativity, study, and assessment. Critical pedagogy itself is also circulating in new ways, marked by a recent tendency to work around or without paywalls, thus eschewing the prohibitive pricing that has limited the public's access to so much scholarly output. This ethos makes authors' and creators' contributions to the pedagogical conversation more widely available both inside and outside the academy, a goal that, not coincidentally, aligns with our own partnership with *Open Screens.* Many other online journals have also emerged over the past decade, offering content that reflects both scholarship and teaching, among these are *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* (2018–); *Cléo: A Journal of Film and Feminism* (2013–2019); *Frames Cinema Journal* (2012–); the longstanding Australian project *Senses of Cinema* (1999–); and many, many others, including myriad outlets dedicated to publishing graduate and undergraduate work in media studies. The field's pedagogical turn may be most clearly formalized in the online, biannual *Film Education Journal* (2018–), a publication that unites filmmakers, critics, teachers, and policymakers under a shared interest in where and how film education is carried out around the world. Less formal in structure, but no less essential in its mission is Catherine Grant's *Film Studies For Free* (2008–), an early, forward-thinking catalog of audiovisual scholarship available to anyone with a stable internet connection. Its continuation well into a second decade reflects its readers' durable appetite for a repository that indexes a burgeoning field of scholarship while also responding to the need for advanced research and reference materials to be openly accessible.

Most of these online publications, including those that include pedagogical writing, adhere to traditional expectations for scholarly tone and content. But reflections on film education can also be personal. Online, open-access journal *The Ciné-Files* has dedicated two full issues – numbers 9 (2015) and 13 (2017) – to pedagogical essays, a genre of academic-adjacent writing that editor Tracy Cox-Stanton (2015) describes as a "candid and open-ended [reflection]" that adopts a "informal, first-person, narrative approach" to describing how and why we as teachers approach a particular film in the classroom. Avoiding the topic- and course-wide angle that characterizes Fischer and Petro's (2012) book, entries in the *Cine-Files* dossiers analyze individual films, including several by women. Sarah Keller (2015) writes about the feminist dynamics of Maya Deren's experimental narrative *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), a staple of film curricula, and Patricia White (2017) reflects on her annual ritual of teaching another film-school stalwart: Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Exploring the juncture of women's cinema with

queer cinema, Virginia Bonner (2017) considers the "pedagogical promise" of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), while Maria Pramaggiore (2017) addresses how she incorporated Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) into courses on New Queer Cinema aimed at undergraduate and graduate students. Still other essays consider more contemporary films: Davina Quinlivan (2017) considers the phenomenological impact of Lucile Hadzihalilovic's *Innocence* (2004), and Amelie Hastie (2015) describes how Céline Sciamma's *Tomboy* (2011) shapes her course on cinema and everyday life. Our hope is that more such collections are forthcoming; in fact, as volume editors we devoted an entire section of *The Sustainable Legacy of Agnès Varda* (2022) to pedagogical essays on her work.

In terms of published reflections, at least, film seems to have made clearer headway than the broader category of media studies in producing essays on critical pedagogy. Countering this trend, the *Teaching Media* project, launched as a quarterly offshoot of the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies,* has covered a range of topics and types of media in its six volumes to date—and, notably, its archive also includes sample syllabi. One of these dossiers, edited by Catherine Fowler, Claire Perkins and Sean Redmond (2020), connects radical pedagogy with videographic criticism, itself a new frontier in both scholarly practice and classroom teaching. Containing yet exceeding film studies, the field of media studies has been expanded by the rise of the video essay as a pedagogical tool – which Grant discussed at the *Teaching Women's Filmmaking* conference – as a vehicle for scholarship, and as itself an object of critical study. Aimed at these latter goals, *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic and Moving Image Studies*, another *JCMS* project, joins *Open Screens* in promoting a peer review system for videographic scholarship that interrogates a range of audiovisual forms, a process upheld even as the same videos are made available without academic scaffolding on Vimeo, YouTube, and other streaming video platforms (Mittell 138). Whether these critical, multimedia texts are encountered independently or in the context of a formally inscribed scholarly/pedagogical environment, such new forms and genres of criticism invite or even demand new methods of teaching and research.

Observing a shift in recent discussions of film studies pedagogy, McEwan (2014) claims that the key theme of pedagogical discourse has moved away from *why* film studies is a worthy subject and towards the question of *how* film and audiovisual media ought to be taught. This is where feminist pedagogies enter the frame. Across the scholarly humanities, including film and media studies, the most prominent legacy of critical, feminist pedagogies belongs to bell hooks, whose influential *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003) build on education scholar Paulo Freire's efforts to reimagine the classroom in defiance of hierarchical models of teaching and learning. The kind of critical pedagogy that hooks espoused opens both

formal and informal learning to different kinds of knowledge, encouraging a perspective that transcends the strictures of traditional scholarship to embrace alternative ways to generate, circulate, and recognize insight. This advocacy is an inherently feminist project, and one that recognizes how, under patriarchy, women and other marginalized genders are especially positioned to possess and, potentially, to convey this alternative knowledge to their communities. This conviction overlaps with calls to decolonize the higher education curriculum, seeking what Usha Iyer defines as "a pedagogy of reparations, restitution, and repair" that would reject the "colonial matrix of power [which operates] through the forces of capitalism and neoliberal globalization" (183). While decolonization underscores how race and geography affect this radical pedagogy, gender and sexuality also shape the "structuring absences" that underpin university curricula (Iyer 181). The trajectory of *Teaching Women's Filmmaking* centers gender, though we remain mindful of its interconnectedness to other foundations of systemic bias. The present moment is ripe for a reassessment of women in the field of film and media studies, not only those whose work is taught, but also women as teachers and students working to advance both the field and the industry.

hooks's recent passing has brought her influence once again to the fore, inviting a retrospective on work that has absolutely (if also unfortunately) retained its urgency for the present moment. Many recent examinations of film pedagogy owe much to her framework. Echoing her emphasis on education as collective practice, Anna Backman Rogers and Anna Misiak (2020) introduce their special issue of *MAI* by defining feminism as "a form of ethics that demands we engage beyond hermetic boundaries of self and open ourselves up to community," including in the visual studies classroom. In *The Cine-Files,* co-editors Cox-Stanton and Kristi McKim (2017) encapsulate hooks's thinking in framing the second pedagogical issue as uniting the roles of teacher and student: "We hope these essays will be valuable not only for teachers but also for students, who we imagine ourselves to be, as we learn from and with these teaching experiences." One of the central concerns for the *Teaching Women's Filmmaking* project is how film studies might embrace the feminist pedagogies that hooks (1994) and her ideological successors have so fervently championed. In many respects, the pedagogical essay, as seen in *The Cine-Files* and elsewhere, is a genre that directly responds to this question by narrating personal experience and articulating specific classroom strategies that align with feminist ideals of community. Not coincidentally, the authors who share these ideals often (though not exclusively) apply them to films that were, themselves, made by women. And this leads us to a basic curricular question: With only limited time, only so many weeks on our course schedules, how can we leverage our curricular choices to allow for a feminist pedagogical praxis?

Building our curricula

Among the most elemental of our choices in building a course is whose work we will invite students to consider. In cases where film and media complement an/other field/s, selecting audiovisual work for the classroom can be especially tricky. Neda Atanasoski (2016) emphasizes a fundamental difference, for instance, between film studies and feminist studies in how each discipline understands the notion of the transnational: "Whereas in film, the transnational predominantly signals certain thematic concentrations, formal and aesthetic characteristics, and political aspects of cinematic production, in feminist studies it primarily performs institutional and disciplining work [...by suggesting] an implicit critique of the discipline's prior omissions that can be corrected through curricular expansiveness" (219–220). Selecting diverse, non-hegemonic contexts of production may be enough to cover transnationality in the context of feminist studies, but in film studies, a full discussion would require a deeper dive into these contexts as well as patterns in form and theme. In such cases, we may feel an obligation to tread the potentially delicate ground where disciplines meet, as Atanasoski does, and there lies a common temptation to rely on this "curricular expansiveness" as a panacea for longstanding (if increasingly glaring) lacunae in course design. In film studies, the cultural weight of the canon also threatens to make immovable objects of some staple texts, although Girish Shambu (2018) sees this, too, more as a question of ideological mindset than of solemn duty to convention. He sees the predominant canon as "a partial representation of the world that remains silent about its own limitedness" and advocates for more "sophisticated attention to representation and ideology" that would recalibrate the field's ingrained prioritization of formalism.

Representation to the point of parity—or beyond!—is one way to approach the question of what to study, but the will to include women's filmmaking on our syllabi only raises further questions. Firstly, and maybe foremost among them: how to define "women"? For our conference, the organizing committee established a maximally inclusive understanding of women, encompassing trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, or any self-identification that would overlap with this category. In short, anyone who sees themselves or the object(s) of their scholarly focus as belonging to this group would be welcomed. The term "women's filmmaking" also needs unpacking, as it could encompass films made by women—whether behind or in front of the camera—and/or films that target an audience made up predominantly of women. This, too, we opted to keep as wide open as our participants needed it to be, but submissions favored an understanding that centered filmmakers rather than audiences. For a time-limited event like a conference, casting a wide net in these ways has merit; however, a course

is a different beast, spread out across multiple weeks with topics or subtopics that build meaning through juxtaposition, comparison, and accumulation. Managing this evolving meaning requires a long-term balancing act that must consider both the distinction and the possible fusion of categories like gender, sexuality, and race along unexpected lines. This was the theme of Tom Leitch's (2021) conference presentation, "A Chorus of Silences: Teaching Women's Cinema in the Context of Other Marginalized Cinemas," in which he discussed how, for a new course, women were considered both in conjunction and in parallel with categories like queer cinema and national cinemas, finally and inevitably suggesting through the course's very structure that such categories are always contingent.

There remains the option of not drawing any attention whatsoever to such taxonomies, just filling a syllabus with work by women and marginalized artists without pointing to this fact. To a degree, such surreptitious substitution can show how conventions have been applied, questioned, stretched, and reframed by folks left outside the traditional canon to make cinephilic conversation amongst themselves. Leaving the standards and standard-bearers behind also encourages a broader diversity of forms, no longer privileging the feature film at the expense of shorts, digital video, and other audiovisual texts and contexts. These forms have generally relied less on authorship discourses to make meaning, although Angela Martin (2003) has argued that our understanding of authorship and auteur status already changes when the filmmaker in question is a woman. So why not go full Barthes and kill off the concept entirely? Give contexts, not creators, the chance to frame discussion—this angle has appeal, especially if a course focuses on audiovisual form. Must we emphasize authorship at all?

With all due apologies to Barthes, despite its pitfalls, there is yet some life in the concept of the author. Janet Staiger (2003) insists that *authorship* – if not necessarily midcentury, original-formula *auteurism* – does matter, "especially to those in non-dominant positions" in society, including women (27). And indeed, looking at the global film industry, women have failed not only to dominate, but to achieve anything close to parity in any industrial category—and other marginalized groups have fared even worse (Simone 2021; Lauzen 2022). Navigating "non-dominant" social and industrial positions to create an audiovisual work and distribute it to the public is, in itself, no small feat; to downplay or bypass this remarkable achievement by dedicating primary or sole attention to its form risks neglecting the contextual understanding that a complete education should provide. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy (2009) remind us that hooks advocated for "creative spaces" that "of course, are not readily given, especially to members of marginalized groups. Instead, they have to be made, demanded, or won" (7). Efforts to build creative spaces for women in film and media

transcend the institutional boundaries of traditional education: activist groups like Collectif 50/50 and funding initiatives like The Future of Film is Female are working to close the gaps in representation and opportunity for women in screen media industries. These political movements, like the problems they have been set up to address, are at least as important to the contemporary film curriculum as aesthetic movements like neorealism or the late-20th century indie boom. Understanding industrial history and current working conditions will matter immensely for young people hoping to launch their careers there, as Katie Bird makes clear in "young women filmmaker(s)," her video essay included in this issue. Diversifying the pool of creators will naturally pose challenges to existing concepts of authorship, as Staiger (2003) acknowledges through the concept of authorial creation as "technique of the self," a definition that disposes of the old way of understanding authorship while "rescu[ing] the expression of the self as a viable, if contingent act—a potent one with real effects" both in film and in the world at large (49).

Ideally, what should emerge from any curated selection of texts – whether it's a syllabus, or a festival program, an exhibited collection, or even the contents of a special collection like ours – is some articulation, however tentative or limited, of the relationship(s) between the margins and the center (wherever we pinpoint it) as well as the interrelationships among these marginal groups. At the macro level, this dynamic can play out within any given film, but a sense of social interconnection grows even stronger once it encircles the complex networks that produce media texts in the first place. In the classroom, hooks emphasizes, interpersonal relationships assume this role, and these relationships are a crucial ethical issue for critical pedagogy: these must be lateral, not hierarchical, and the ultimate goal is to honor the capacity of every invested individual to exist simultaneously as a teacher and a learner. Each person might then contribute to and draw from the collective effort according to their own unique, embodied perspective. As professionals running a classroom, one of the most difficult steps in creating such an environment is accepting our limitations—of knowledge, of our mental, physical, and emotional capacities—and making these visible to students when the situation calls for such acknowledgment. Importantly, Nathalia E. Jaramillo and Peter McLaren (2009) explain that the point of this is not to dominate the discourse nor to dwell on the personal, but rather to leverage each other's perspective as "a means to move outside the immediacy of personal experience and into the realm of critical agency [...to] put in motion new forms of generating and enacting knowledge for the betterment of the self and the collective." (25) The ideal is for the individual and the group to work in tandem, seeing one another eye to eye so that they might collectively find new ways of seeing the world.

The elephant in this de-hierarchized classroom is assessment, which risks compromising a fully realized resistance to traditional, top-down instruction. Whatever the syllabus contains and however the classroom is run, at all levels of education most students are regularly and more or less rigorously sorted according to a determined standard of performance—that is, they are given grades. Although a growing chorus of educators has begun to challenge this expectation, for most public institutions, these grades, in turn, become metrics that bring a raft of consequential outcomes: institutional access to funding, especially from the state; individual access to higher education or job opportunities; and many other life-altering decisions imposed by external bureaucracies. In university contexts, assessment also cuts both ways, with standard practice including student evaluation of instruction that is often incorporated into hiring and promotion processes. Researchers have underscored myriad problems with student evaluation of university faculty, including discrimination according to race, gender, accented speech, and other factors linked more to a particular instructor than a style or outcome of instructional practice (Heffernan 2021). Such bigotry can target faculty at all ranks, but the cumulative effects of these negative comments can hit precarious instructors hardest of all. And, of course, teachers are not immune from prejudice vis-à-vis the students who enroll in their courses. Still, even with the sincerest personal intentions to confront our own biases and embrace alternative ways of relating to our students, the systematic demand for assessment, especially in the form of ranked grades, threatens to undermine progress towards a truly radical pedagogy.

While calls to abolish standardized course evaluations in universities have gone glaringly unheeded, there remains the possibility of ungrading as a means of equalizing classroom relationships. As a concept, ungrading has an established history (e.g., Ellison 1967), though it is not consistently understood as referring to (a) specific practice(s) (Blum 2020). Ungrading highlights the spirit of shared discovery cultivated through radical pedagogy, and it can emerge in different ways; it may be as simple as studying work that is new to both teacher and students, like a newly released film, or perhaps building in opportunities for peer review among students before the final submission of an assignment. The latest resurgence of academic interest in ungrading likely stems in no small part from the pedagogical contingencies of the covid-19 pandemic, as educators became more willing to experiment with pedagogical practice once so many entrenched, unquestioned habits already felt irrevocably upended (DiSalvo and Ross 2022: 13). Successful ungrading can change significantly from one discipline to another (Martin et. al 2021). What it looked like for DiSalvo and Ross (2022), who work in art history, was an expanded feedback matrix that included peer-to-peer evaluation as

well as teacher-student communication; it also emphasized personal self-reflection, including self-grading, to measure progress within a given learning plan. These broad strategies could be readily adapted to media studies, given its similar balance between creative practice and historical-theoretical curricula—however, depending on administrative constraints, there may be no way around the requirement to provide, at least, a final letter grade as a capstone for the course (Leslie 2022: 2). The shape of our resistance to these systems will vary, and sharing different strategies may encourage others to take as much conscientious action as they can within their own institutional contexts.

About this collection

Every element in this three-part core of pedagogical praxis – what to study, how to run a class, and how to assess outcomes – stands to be reshaped by feminist principles. With the Teaching Women's Filmmaking conference, we aimed to inspire and continue in-depth conversations about critical pedagogy that benefit participants in the short term while also looking towards better long-term visibility for the topic in media studies' academic circles. Building on our 2020 Varda conference and its subsequent book project, the 2021 *Teaching Women's Filmmaking* conference, in turn, inspired our 2022 iteration at Bilgi University, *New Creative Praxis in Film and Television: Hybrid Futures of Gender Equality*, with talks and panels that expanded hooks's notion of creative spaces into the realm of praxis. These events, along with the communities that they have helped build, have centered personal experience as a source of meaningful reflections worth sharing with others, not least so that we might work collectively to refine and implement these ideas.

This dedicated special collection of *Open Screens* compiles five contributions that were presented at or inspired by the *Teaching Women's Filmmaking* conference: three video essays and two articles, each addressing pedagogy in its own way. Among the video essays, Estrella Sendra's study of gaze and sound techniques in Nadine Labaki's *Caramel* (2007) forms a key part of the curriculum she uses to teach audiovisual sound, underscoring how form can suggest subversive readings of audiovisual texts. Recalling her own experiences as a film student, Katie Bird delves into *The Souvenir* (2019) and its production-focused paratexts in "young women filmmaker(s)" to examine how filmmaking is taught, a process that reveals the intended and unintended lessons that this pedagogy can contain for women learning the craft. The collaborative video essay "Teaching Nearby, Learning Nearby" was directly inspired by the conference, intended as a videographic capstone for the event. It borrows its title from Trinh Minh-ha, whose work Grant discussed at length in her keynote, and inspired by Bird's video essay, it

takes *The Souvenir* as an antithesis to hooks's decentered, anti-hierarchical pedagogy while comparing it to the formal and informal learning depicted in another woman-led film released the same year: Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019).

In her written contribution, Jolene Mairs Dyer applies the notion of a matrixial screen encounter to documentarian Kim Longinotto's observational style and subject-centered approach, emphasizing how pairing this concept with this director is well suited to teaching alternative forms of documentary. In an overview of her course on film and architecture, Ekin Pınar looks at the interdisciplinary resonance of *The Babadook* (2014) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2015) for students enrolled in an architecture program, highlighting relationships between media, space, urbanism, and gender.

The path that has led to this collection was not fully straightforward. It involved retracing some steps to chart unfamiliar territory more fully, trying novel ways to process the knowledge and experiences shared at the conference and, finally, honoring our impulse to carry it forward. This led directly to "Teaching Nearby, Learning Nearby," which we created as a collective of four – Feride Çiçekoğlu, Melisa Önel, Fetullah Solhan, and Colleen Kennedy-Karpat – each bringing different personal and professional capacities to the project. The resulting video essay combines the academic with the practical, and this diversity of input means that the end result surpasses what any of us might have accomplished alone. The films in the video essay certainly show the power of learning from others, and for us, making the video essay demonstrated the value of collaboration and resilience in carving out a creative space dedicated to teaching and learning.

The conversations about pedagogical praxis that begun with our conference continue in this special collection, which we are proud to share with the readers of *Open Screens*. We send our warmest thanks to the editorial team for this opportunity and to all our contributors for seeing their work through to this stage. And we invite more voices to join in—wherever and however they can—so that film and media studies can rise to the challenges of incorporating radical feminist pedagogy anywhere our teaching and learning may take us.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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