

Book Review

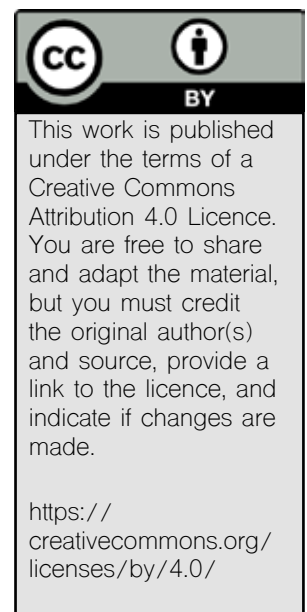
Deirdre O'Neill, *Film as a Radical Pedagogic Tool*
Routledge, 2019; 180 pages,
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Deirdre O'Neill's *Film as a Radical Pedagogic Tool* offers a timely and provocative intervention into the relationship between class and culture, as well as the broader field of film education. Both areas have seen an upsurge in interest and academic publication in recent years, as attested by the success of the *Film Education Journal*, established by Jamie Chambers of Edinburgh College of Art in 2018, the recent establishment of the journal *Class and Culture*, by O'Neill herself, and the growth of the Working Class Academics conference (<https://workingclass-academics.co.uk/>) and the publication of Teresa Crew's (2020) invaluable *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics: Precarity and Diversity in Academia*. What makes O'Neill's work so invigorating is its insistence on the relationship between theory and practice, something that is continually seen as prohibitive, or not well articulated and actuated, in terms of more 'professionalised' film education courses, such as those found in film schools (Stoneman, 2013).

O'Neill's auto-ethnographic approach to writing about the Inside Film project she co-ordinated, which helped prisoners and people on probation make their own films, and her reflexivity about her own liminal position as a precariously situated working-class academic within the traditionally stratified and middle-class world of academia (without the economic, political, social and cultural capital of colleagues) gives the book an empowering subjectivity. This perspective resists the normalising tendency towards objectivity and distance often thought the standard for academic writing. Indeed, O'Neill is forthright about the specific value of her work: unlike most films with working-class life as their subject mat-



ter, the films made by the Inside Film participants are not filtered through the perspective of middle-class graduates of film schools and unpaid interns for whom the designation 'radical' might be a badge of honour in the marketplace. (p. 4) O'Neill might here be thinking of famed social-realist filmmaker Ken Loach, who has frequently been a contested figure for his focus on the working class, despite his privileged, middle-class upbringing. Indeed, Peter Mullan, star of Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998) found the melodramatic excesses of that film's morbid ending antithetical to the idea of social realism (Spencer, 1999).

O'Neill's book begins by outlining the relationship between prison and prisoners and film, and the ways in which film is a uniquely radical cultural tool through which prisoners can achieve self-expression and develop a 'class-based critically aware consciousness' (p. 15). Here O'Neill begins, briefly, to outline the content of the Inside Film workshops, or rather the deliberate lack of pre-planned and structured content, which allows for a more organic development of relationships between participants as well as enabling the workshops to be driven by the interests and desires of those taking part, rather than a hierarchical and pre-determined set of tasks and discussion points set by the external organisers. O'Neill navigates the complexity of utilising the prisoner's own knowledge of and interest in film, which tends towards Hollywood and mainstream film culture, while trying to raise an awareness of the ideological construction of hegemonic societal norms that such fare implicitly offers. Here, O'Neill resists beginning with more experimental and politically charged cinema, knowing that its lack of narrative and formal consistency with popular Hollywood culture will alienate those without the historic cultural, educational and social capital to engage with it. This relates to a common discussion in film education, and indeed a frequent criticism of the kind of cinephilic film appreciation that film education projects are often inevitably imbued with. Such appreciation is evident in Bergala's famed *The Cinema Hypothesis* (2016) which, despite its unquestionable pedagogic richness and passion for cinema history, is somewhat guilty of a canonical approach to film history (based on Hitchcock, Godard and Kiarostami, for example) that are probably unfamiliar to, and, perhaps, difficult to engage with, for many young people.

This is a question that O'Neill returns to later in the book, in its most impressive chapter, 'Radical Cinematic Practices'. Indeed, if there is one criticism here, is that the book does a lot of theoretical heavy lifting, some of it a little repetitive, before getting to the heart of the matter in a detailed discussion of the pedagogic approach of the project, as opposed to the discussions, useful refreshers though they are, of class, hegemony and culture. In this chapter, O'Neill reiterates the project's desire to begin with the ideologically problematic Hollywood fare that the participants are familiar with, before

introducing oppositional cinema in the form of early North American silent cinema, and Latin American ‘third cinema’. O’Neill highlights these modes, and historic moments, as those which privileged cinema as a public service capable of – and indeed ethically obligated to – offer information, counter-insight, and radical political solutions to the social struggles of their eras. O’Neill links the technological developments of key eras (the development of cinema in the silent era, and the possibilities afforded by lightweight, mobile cameras in the 1970s) to the contemporary moment where, again, technological advances have made cinematic self-expression more democratic than ever, through the ubiquity of the smartphone and free software editing solutions. Impressive as this section is, it does feel somewhat more of a literature review of early Hollywood and third cinema, and it is notably missing a precise and thorough description of filmmaking pedagogy.

While drawing inspiration from Espinosa’s ‘impure’ cinema, and discussing the guerrilla nature of the filmmaking, on cheap equipment, quickly made, there is no substantive discussion of how to teach film, how to frame a shot, and why a director might choose to frame something in one manner rather than another. There are lengthy discussions of content, and being guided by a participatory approach to story development, but very little on the art of film. While the project shares Espinosa’s disapproval of ‘perfect’ cinema, the project doesn’t seem to engage with the formal parameters of cinema as an art form. While there is a discussion of one of the film’s produced, *Bare Inequality*, there is little summation of the project’s approach to teaching film and to radically rethinking film practice and how it is taught.

What results, then, is a book that is a refreshing and urgent discussion of the classed dynamics of film, the need for both a more diverse representational screen media and a more radical approach to participation and filmmaking. O’Neill’s argument is persuasive and authoritative when developing its Marxist critique of contemporary culture and summarising the radical potential of early and third cinema. It offers a substantial building block for those looking to expand upon the approach of *Inside Film*, and develop a radical approach to the teaching of film as both an artistic practice and an act of resistance.

References

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