

# V.F PERKINS 1936–2016

## Badness: an issue in the aesthetics of film

**Editorial Note:** This is a paper presented by V.F. Perkins (1936–2016) to the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Conference in London (2005). Perkins presented several versions of this paper (and he taught the topic of badness in his classes on film aesthetics at the University of Warwick for many years), but he never formally published the work. We are presenting it here in *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* because we think it is a valuable addition to Perkins' published criticism and his philosophy of criticism.

Despite renewed interest in aesthetic questions, there remains a nervousness in our field about aesthetic evaluation, based on a fear that it must always and only set out to authorise sets of tastes and preferences which work to sustain privilege. In this view, reflected in a concern with the canonical, evaluation has a primary purpose to establish or defend orders of rank between the esteemed and the despised, to validate a scale that has such as *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928) at its top, and such as *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (Arthur Crabtree, 1944) at its base. Against this concentration on preference and hierarchy (Shakespeare over *Titanic*? Oasis over Schubert?) I stress another aspect – evaluation as the articulation of value, the grateful effort to spell out the nature of a significant achievement. In critical

practice, we find plenty of instances where evaluation is founded on admiration and gratitude and strives for community of understanding rather than for exclusivity.<sup>1</sup>

I suggest also that issues of evaluation may be approached freshly and usefully from the opposite angle, through a consideration of badness. Is it our experience that movies may have the attributes of bad communications, being for instance bigoted, deceitful, vindictive, hypocritical or self-serving? If so, then surely it is necessary to find terms in which we may discuss the badness of films which are bad as works of art rather than in their presumed or demonstrated social effects.

A scene from *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) provides an emblematic instance of cinematic badness which is distinct both from ideological offensiveness and (since it is made with great proficiency) from ineptitude. The scene employs an inflated rhetoric and some crude but effective devices of emotional manipulation that may disguise contradictions between its declared project (anti-authoritarian) and its dramatic structure (which validates the authority of the hero).

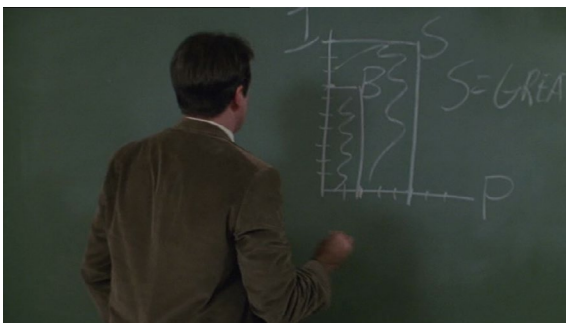
The scene comes about twenty minutes from the start of the film – an extract chosen because its four minutes do make a discussable kind of mini-movie, but also a sequence that dramatises issues of artistic judgment. Robin Williams plays a teacher called Keating newly appointed to teach English at an exclusive boys' school.<sup>2</sup> My extract reaches its climax with the teacher's words: 'In this class you will learn to think for yourselves again.'<sup>3</sup>

The sequence starts by equating the teacher with the boys: his gestures of boredom at the reading from the book are shown to us after we have seen a range of similar gestures from the boys, filmed in a similar floating movement of the camera. Note the convergence of close-ups on the cut that links the most abstracted of the pupils to the image of the teacher.

The difference is that the boys believe that they should try to conceal their boredom whereas Keating *performs* his boredom so as to validate the display of true feeling. [You will have noted the ignorance and spite in the alleged reading of 'Dr J Evans Pritchard, Ph.D']

Throughout the scene one boy, the red-haired Cameron, is used to define for the audience the appropriate response. The





definition is achieved through style: Cameron has already been characterised unattractively and in this scene he is made to represent the opposite of the good, and thus to be a crucial element in its definition.

First, he represents sheep-like submission by being shown to copy down everything that the teacher puts on the blackboard, and by being shown to be the only boy who does this. After he has been scorned for his conformism, he is then mocked for his resistance to Keating's instructions and has to be prodded into copying.

Even this he performs with timid neatness, by tearing along the edge of a ruler. The straightedge is made into an effective metaphor of character. The move away from routine provokes him to anxiety rather than to pleasure. Note the abundance of close-ups on Cameron's actions.

The scene is not only, as I said in my introduction, a scene about art and criticism. It is also about education, about teaching as performance and about demonstrating appropriate ways of acting upon a critical judgment.

Can the scene's joy in destruction stand as an image for liberation? (The more vivid image might be of a book burning; <sup>6</sup> but that image would remind the audience in troubling ways of the recent history of Europe and America.) 'In my class you will learn to think for yourselves again.' This line occurs over the image of the waste paper basket travelling from boy to boy. The movement has a pleasing rhythm, and our pleasure is enhanced by the completion of the circuit. What is proclaimed as Individualism is pictured as militaristic uniformity. Note absence / exclusion from this image of the figure of Cameron (validated by the possibility of seeing this as a Cameron viewpoint image).

Keating is teaching vandalism while he claims to be teaching poetry. But the scene mobilises its rhetoric – for instance through the reaction of the more conventional teacher who intrudes upon the class – to secure approval for Keating's approach.<sup>4</sup>

Here as throughout the film Keating is never made to face an awkward question of judgment. He is always right. If he had taught the boys to think for themselves, we might expect one or more of them to challenge his judgment, to ask what he thinks about the matters of 'Perfection' and 'Importance' in the appreciation of art; or whether Evans-Pritchard might







have something useful to say about Tennyson. But no boy raises any question that the film takes seriously.<sup>5</sup> No boy refuses, in a principled way, to join in the use of violence against ideas that is pictured in the destruction of the books – and the film never suggests this as a possibility. Only the dislikeable Cameron shows any resistance.

I suggest that there is a failure of perspective in relation to Keating and the figure of the star. The film gratifies the spectator by making it easy to be on the right side; it offers a dishonestly simplified viewpoint on conflict. We must recognise that this is only one scene. Whether we agree to take it as an instance of highly effective but corrupt filmmaking must depend on whether we think the scene accurately represents the film as a whole.

Perhaps my interpretation of the scene could be challenged by seeing it differently within the context of the complete film? Could this scene become part of a critique – or

a more rounded assessment – of Keating? I do not think we could deny that there is a contradiction in the scene between ‘Think for yourselves’ and ‘Follow my orders’. But we might defend the contradiction. We might see it as deliberate and eloquent: in terms of character, the image shows that the teacher’s deeds are in conflict with his words. Or we might understand the sequence thematically, as illustrating that there must always be a contradiction in the claim to lead a revolt against authority.

The question of intention arises here. Do we believe that we are meant to notice the contradiction? Or is it a failure of the film to construct a truthful image of education and judgment. It is possible that the filmmakers were so eager to produce an exciting and amusing scene that they lost sight of the issues of education and judgment. There was a failure to reconcile showmanship with thematic intelligence.

This seems a failure in the movie’s own evident project: it wants to be a gripping melodrama; it wants to be a thoughtful dramatisation of important issues. It must always be difficult to achieve dramatic vigour and, at the same time, present a coherent and satisfying consideration of ideas.

I suggest that *in the result* the film is dishonest and self-satisfied in its presentation of deep and important issues about art and about the politics of education.<sup>7</sup> This suggestion pays the film the tribute of supposing that it had the possibility of being penetrating and intelligent as well as exciting. We cannot discover whether a work will reward serious attention without approaching it as if that is possible. We must keep our eyes and minds open to the possibility that a film is deeper, more intelligent and more profoundly composed than we can see at first viewing.<sup>8</sup>

But the same process through which we aim to articulate some facets of the brilliance of great movies may lead us to understand the failings of lesser work.

Most scholars in film studies in the English-speaking world are worried by, and many are hostile to, evaluation of the kind that I have presented here. Some are afraid, and some are certain, that to discuss the defects in a popular film is to claim a position of intellectual superiority over those who have liked it, and who have been excited and moved by its drama.

I think the problem is that they hold a view of evaluation very close to the one presented by the author Evans-Pritchard in *Dead Poets Society*. They think that evaluation has two main features: firstly is a matter of measurement – it discovers this much Achievement and this much Importance; secondly it is a matter of hierarchy – it asserts that Shakespeare’s achievement is larger and weightier than Byron’s. As a result it gives the critic a false authority. It allows the critic to become a dictator who tells us which works and which artists we are allowed to admire and which works we are allowed to enjoy.

I agree with the teacher Keating that this is a false view of artistic appreciation. In the first place evaluation is not a process like the judgement in a court of law; it cannot fix a verdict which the world must then accept. Instead, it is a contribution to a discussion. It acknowledges one’s place as the member of a community with other film-lovers – any of one’s

listeners or readers may challenge or raise problems with the view that one has proposed. The arguments I have sketched about DPS are open to anyone who is able to understand the film's drama.

We can show one another new understandings. We can open doors for one another onto new pleasures, new observations and new interpretations. We can trust others to show us where we have been narrow or hasty or forgetful. In the critical conversation it does not matter if we are unable to resolve our differences. I believe that a philosophical account of evaluation must be able encompass a common experience. It must recognise what for me is a vitally significant fact – that my appreciation of some great works of cinema has been created or enlarged by the ideas and observations of other critics. There are many movies that I found boring or puzzling when I first saw them. In time, some of those movies have become very important and pleasurable to me because other spectators or other writers have opened my eyes to an achievement that I did not see for myself. Sometimes others have given me the first suggestion that allowed me to progress into new and revealing observations of my own.

Evaluation need not be a process of ranking the cinema's achievements in a hierarchy, nor of praising one group of movies at the expense of another. Instead it is part of the effort to understand, to exchange and to share the understanding of the value that works of art have for us. Good criticism is motivated by gratitude for the achievement of the filmmakers. It tries to present an accurate and sincere account of the meaning that films have for us. Critical understanding is most importantly an understanding of excellence. Criticism is an effort that we join in together to explain why films matter to us. I believe it is also our communal attempt to reward the courage, wisdom and generosity of the artists. The goal is to understand and to give words to the precision and subtlety that film can achieve, and finally to reward the artist's attention to detail with an equal attentiveness in the viewing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have the transcripts of two other versions that are very similar to each other, one given at the Faculty of Art and Design, Middlesex University (for which we have no date) and one given at the *Second Research Forum on Cinema* at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 2000. In the footnotes, I will include some material from these versions that does not appear in this SCMS version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> 'His subject is Literature, and his love is Poetry.'

<sup>3</sup> 'This scene comes about twenty minutes from the start of the film. We have been introduced to a group of boys preparing for University entrance at the start of a new term in an exclusive American boarding school. The school advertises its success in preparing boys to prosper in the world of business and academic competition. Its headmaster emphasises uniformity and a reliance upon tradition. The story is about the impact upon this school and these boys of a new teacher who opposes the dullness of routine and who urges the boys to "Seize the Day".'

<sup>4</sup> 'The scene appeals powerfully to young audiences but its appeal is, I suggest, based on the pleasure of the fantasy that the best teacher would be one who joins in disorder and who disrupts discipline rather than enforcing it.'

<sup>5</sup> Perkins' highlighting of badness as a useful evaluative concept evokes literary critic I. A Richards' chapter 'Badness in Poetry' in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* ([1924] 2001, London and New York: Routledge). Some of their concerns are similar. For example, Perkins' claims about the simplistic sealing up of the drama joins hands with Richards claims concerning the premature 'impression of conclusiveness' in poetry (187). As far as I know, Perkins had no knowledge of the chapter by Richards, and he would surely have cited it had he done.

<sup>6</sup> I have retained the underlining that Perkins uses.

<sup>7</sup> In a note at the end of the paper, Perkins writes, 'It's the *film* that is dishonest, not necessarily out [of] an intention of dishonesty.'

<sup>8</sup> 'Perhaps it is thought that I am asking too much of the film, inspecting the detail of its gestures too closely? My answer to that accusation would be that it is only by probing the detail – by taking each of the filmmaker's decisions seriously – that we may discover the depth of the achievement. When I spoke about this film at the University of Pittsburgh a few years ago a student in the audience began a question by saying that of course the film would be confused and dishonest. It was designed only as a work of entertainment for the thoughtless masses. It would therefore be pointless to expect or hope for a serious discussion of important ideas. My reply to this was that all popular films are about serious issues. They have to be. If they are to engage the spectator's interest and sympathy they have to dramatise feelings, desires, ideas and conflicts that matter in the world that the audience inhabits. All movies are about important subjects. The

important question is – Do they present those important subjects with intelligence as well as vigour? Does their dramatisation of the issues recognise the depth and complexity of the problems they have undertaken?

We might ask whether the scene from *Dead Poets Society* satisfactorily balances the need for action (shown in the tearing of the pages) against the need for reflection [thought] – shown in the heavy [boring] seriousness of the words read from the book.

When I suggested in Pittsburgh that the film was dishonest and self-satisfied in its presentation of deep and important issues about art and about the politics of education, I was taking *Dead Poets Society* more seriously than my young questioner.'

<sup>9</sup> Readers will note that Perkins' closing remarks refer to matters of evaluation generally, rather than to the topic of badness per se. This may be because the topic of badness was meant to stand as one possible example of evaluative practice. The version of the paper given in Tehran Museum was called 'Evaluation in Film Study' and at Middlesex University 'Evaluation in Film Criticism – the Case of Badness'.