

The Embodied Screen: Rural Education in French Cinema

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Introduction

According to retired teacher Jean-Michel Burel featured in the documentary *Mon maître d'école* (Thérond 2016), France's centralized national education system has been one of the country's main socializing agents. It creates unity and a French identity. Similarly, ethnographer Reed-Danahay notes that 'l'éducation nationale' gives a diverse, dispersed rural population a common language, culture, and values (Reed-Danahay 3-4, 12-13). Scholars Béatrice Mabilon-Bonfils and Laurent Saadoun argue, "[c]'est l'instruction qui fera le citoyen" (14). Burel's belief in the important role school has played in uniting France is evident throughout many of the lessons he

teaches while Thérond films him during his last year before retiring. This sentiment is the most well-pronounced in the scene in which Burel takes his students to a WWI memorial. The scene is replete with patriotic music and a long take of Burel and a colleague holding a wreath made of blue, white, and red flowers to match his tri-colored sash as he slowly walks up a hill. The camera's low angle, the patriotic music, and the students walking behind him make it seem as if he is returning from a long journey or battle as he appears over the crest of the hill. Burel talks about how students need to learn about this history, because it teaches republican values. Each student then reads the name of a fallen soldier, and they chant "*mort pour la France*" after each name.

This positive image of school forming future citizens is in contrast with a 2011 report by the *Conseil économique, social et environnemental*. The report highlights a common misconception that rural schools are backwards, impoverished and failing despite the fact they perform slightly above national standards¹.

¹ A series of studies from 1999 to 2006 by the *Observatoire de l'école rurale* concluded that rural students typically perform at or above the national average in math and French (Alpe and Barthes 12, Champollion 45). For more measures indicating the success of rural schools, refer to pages 60-63 of the 2011 report by the *Conseil économique, social et environnemental* (Nau).

The report states, “[la] relation positive de la scolarité avec le milieu rural va à l’encontre d’une tendance encore très répandue à la dénonciation de la piètre qualité de l’école rurale et de son éloignement de la modernité” (Nau 60). People also misjudge rural schools due to their isolation, both geographic and “cultural” (Alpe, “Existe-t-il” 76; Wolter 70)². Sociologists Yves Alpe and Angela Barthes confirm the discrepancy between preconceived notions of rural schools and the reality that they may not be underperforming and note that much of official discourse and public policy since the 1960s has focused on problems facing rural schools (Alpe and Barthes 7-8).

Reed-Danahay, however, warns that some have a tendency to fall into the other extreme and create an overly romanticized image of rural life whereby school is a perfect icon of national unity and strength. She writes, “[i]n an age when popular images of contemporary urban life often depend upon either a nostalgia for the good old days in rural communities or a condemnation for the ‘ignorance’ and ‘passivity’ of country folk in former times, the study of [rural] schooling [...] contributes to

² I put “cultural” in quotes, because the “cultural” isolation that Alpe and Wolter discuss refers to isolation from cultural resources such as museums, libraries, and theaters that help students develop a certain bourgeois culture favored by *l’Éducation nationale*.

a more nuanced view” (Reed-Danahay 20). In recent decades, films about rural schools have encouraged viewers to rethink some of the preconceptions about education in the countryside and create exactly this type of nuanced view. The four films studied here: *Ça commence aujourd’hui* (Tavernier 1999) *Un lycée pas comme les autres* (Barjol 2001) *Mon maître d’école* (Thérond 2016), and *Être et avoir* (Philibert 2002), are neither completely nostalgic for a bygone era of simplicity in the countryside nor do they focus solely on the backwardness of rural life and education.

In the following pages, I analyze how certain works are closer to the lived realities of rural schools than others and avoid either stigmatization or creating an overly idyllic image. This, however, does not mean the others are dishonest or untruthful. Rather, they have a different set of narrative and aesthetic strategies that serve to make a specific intervention in discussions on education. I also show how documentary and fiction both have the same potential to either uphold misconceptions about rural school or offer a more nuanced viewpoint, thus confirming the thinking of scholars such as Bill Nichols, Stella Bruzzi, and Erik Barnouw who oppose the documentary/fiction divide. Nichols writes:

Documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds through subjective construction. Documentary and fiction, social actor and social other, knowledge and doubt, concept and experience share boundaries that inescapably blur (*Blurred Boundaries* 1).

Yet this thinking needs to be elaborated in order to account for the varying levels of the subjective, the personal, and even the fictional within documentary.

In order to better understand some of the mechanisms that make certain documentaries closer to lived realities than others, it is helpful to turn to Alison J. Murray Levine's concept of embodied spectatorship. Levine notes that fictional classroom films in France are more likely to be political and paint a bleaker picture than documentaries, because a fiction film director is less likely to give the viewer an experience of embodied spectatorship, or the feeling of being in the same space as those being filmed (Murray Levine 106). She describes embodied spectatorship by writing:

Each of these films follows a small group of characters, avoiding verbal, textual, or statistical argumentation

in favor of a focus on students and student experience. [...] [T]hese films [propose] an embodied engagement with the educational environment. Closely observed, intimate encounters with educators and students reveal the human qualities of the pedagogical process (105-06).

Rather than including a generalized commentary about education, directors of classroom documentaries impart a feeling of embodied spectatorship through aesthetic techniques such as close-ups and carefully recording bodily sounds that provide a multisensorial experience. In what Levine describes as a desire to invite the viewer to share the same space with the filmed subjects, classroom documentarians emphasize commonplace learning moments (106). This allows them to avoid reproducing the clichés upheld by popular and political discourse.

Levine, however, does not account for the fact that not all documentaries provide the same level of embodied spectatorship and that some classroom documentaries actually reproduce misconceptions about school. Since not all classroom documentaries create an embodied experience, it is more useful to think of documentary and fiction films alike as falling on a spectrum. On one end fall films that emphasize individual students and the physical and sensory nature of learning without

reproducing clichés or stereotypes. On the other end, we find works that focus on general commentary. By distancing themselves from the lived, embodied experience of the classroom, these films are sometimes more likely to reproduce false narratives. In this study, I analyze the ways in which fiction and documentary sometimes use similar aesthetic and narrative strategies and make comparable interventions on public debates. I show that embodied spectatorship is the technique that most allows a work to closely approach the realities of the classroom. Combining Levine's thinking with the idea that the documentary/fiction divide is blurred, I also argue that the degree to which a film paints an authentic picture of the classroom is due primarily to creative choices rather than inherent differences between the documentary and fictional modes.

Sensations of the Local: *Être et avoir*

Philibert's *Être et avoir* (2002) takes place in a one room elementary school in Auvergne and follows the teacher, Georges Lopez, throughout the course of a school year. *Être et avoir* does not have a central plotline and is more of a meandering as we

watch Lopez's students learn and mature. Many critics - Falcon, Mandlebaum, and Matthews among others - have said that Philibert offers an idyllic and nostalgic vision of rural life and education. Richard Falcon writes, "Philibert's nuanced portrait is free from the 'issues'- league tables, drugs, truancy- that usually dominate the media focus on education. Instead *Être et avoir* gets back to basics- to the mysteries and optimism at the heart of acquiring knowledge" (28). While Falcon may overstate Philibert's avoidance of issues in rural education, it is true that they are not central. Most of the issues that arise are attributed either to normal disputes between children or their personal lives and are never explained in terms of broad socio-political problems. This is because, as Levine explains, Philibert is interested in inviting the viewer to feel what it is like to learn in one particular place at a specific moment. Philibert uses an array of techniques such as extreme close-ups and "closely miked sound" to invite the viewer to feel what it is like to be in the classroom (Levine 112).

Nonetheless, there are a few moments in which *Être et avoir* alludes to issues in education. These issues, however, only speak to the local context. One issue that Philibert does address is the challenge of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. The first time this problem is mentioned is when Lopez scolds two older

students for fighting and tells them it sets a bad example for the younger students. Lopez adds that they could send a powerful message to the younger students by showing it is possible to get along. While worrying about the older students' influence on the younger ones is a responsibility that teachers in larger schools do not have, it is not framed as problematic in *Être et avoir*. Instead, Lopez turns this into an asset for his classroom.

At another moment, a student named Jojo tells Lopez that he wants to be a teacher just like him. Lopez asks Jojo if he would make the students of different ages work at the same time, and Jojo replies he would have each group work one after the next. Instead of pausing for reflection or commentary on the difficulties of a *classe unique*³, Philibert invites the viewer to continue feeling and experiencing the rest of the school day with the students. After Jojo says he wants to be a teacher like Lopez, the camera cuts to a shot of Jojo writing on the board taken from the point of view of the students. The cameraperson, and by extension the viewer, is sitting at the table with Jojo's peers as they watch him write. The camera then cuts between shots of Jojo and closeups of the students' faces, allowing the viewer to

³ *Classe unique* translates to "single class" and is often used as shorthand when referring to a one-room schoolhouse in French.

see their emotions clearly. We hear every sound of the students fidgeting, and it is as if we are in the classroom with them.

Another concern present throughout the film is the older students' anxiety about attending middle school when they graduate elementary school. In one scene, a shy and anxious student, Nathalie, talks to Monsieur Lopez about her fears of going to middle school. While this is indicative of the larger problem of students from a *classe unique* having trouble integrating into larger middle schools, Philibert does not frame Nathalie's anxieties within this broader issue⁴. Rather, he allows us to feel Nathalie's fears. She and Monsieur Lopez sit on a set of stairs, and we experience almost the full duration of their conversation as if we are witnessing it in real time. The scene is nearly four minutes long and consists of a single, stationary shot. The camera is positioned at the same level as Nathalie and Monsieur Lopez who are only a few feet away, giving the impression that we are sitting with them. Sound and bodily movements are the primary mechanisms that allow the viewer to have an experience of embodied spectatorship. We hear the birds chirping and Nathalie sniffing and crying. At one point,

⁴ Refer to *Sociologie de l'école rurale* (Alpe and Fauquet) for a discussion on this topic.

we watch Nathalie fidget and nervously scratch her legs, and Philibert uses a sort of auditory close-up to make the scratching just as loud as Monsieur Lopez was moments ago. By making the viewer experience the same feelings and physical sensations as Nathalie, Philibert is able to address issues arising from having only one teacher through the lens of how it impacts one particular student and thus avoid linking this situation to broader problems.

Philibert also addresses the issue of geographic isolation by providing an embodied experience in which the viewer feels as if she shares sensations of isolation with the film's subjects. The opening credits engage the spectator's sense of hearing and immerses her in a cold, wintry countryside as she listens to the harsh sound of wind along with birds chirping and farmers giving orders to animals while only seeing white text on a black background. After the credits, the spectator's sense of vision is engaged, and we see farmers move cows through a field as the wind quickly blows snow almost horizontally. The next shot is from inside the classroom and shows the snow swirling outside the window. For the next two and a half minutes, several long takes show the school van hurtling down small, sinuous, snow-covered streets to pick up students. The camera is often positioned on the dashboard to show the driver's point of view,

and the viewer experiences the monotony of the drive through the snow and feels as if she is in the van.

The scenes that show these children's home lives also speak to the isolation of this region. School is particularly challenging for them, because they must spend a great deal of time working on family farms. Just after the aforementioned scene in which Lopez talks to two students who had a fight, the camera cuts to a stark and gloomy shot of hay bales covered with tarps blowing in the breeze with a gray sky in the background. We also hear clanking that seems to be the sound of silverware. The next shot shows Julien, one of the students involved in the fight, driving a tractor. All the while, the same clanking is still audible. The viewer slowly becomes aware that this is likely something much larger than silverware for it to be audible over a tractor. Then, the camera cuts to cows feeding, and the viewer learns that the clanking was actually the cows' chains against the trough. There is then a scene in which Julien's entire family helps him with his homework and his mother slaps him rather hard when he makes a mistake. At one point, we also see that all of Julien's family combined is unable to help with his homework which further compounds his difficulties at school.

While the shots of the farm may otherwise evoke nostalgia for a bygone era of bucolic living, it is placed between

two scenes in which we see Julien deal with some sort of difficulty, thus implying that there is also a harsh side to rural life. Moreover, the colors and lighting are much darker and gloomier than in most of the other shots of the countryside, and the sounds are more unpleasant. Instead of hearing birds or peaceful music as is often the case, we hear the screeching of the tractor and loud clanking. Showing the dreariness of his home life directly after the discussion with Lopez about his fight provides a full picture of Julien. The spectator starts to feel why Julien is so aggressive through experiencing the sound of the harsh wind and seeing the dreariness of the countryside. Philibert's choice to put the fight mediation scene directly before the family farm scene in order to create a specific image of Julien reflects John Grierson's thinking that all documentary filmmaking is creative work (661-62). Here, Philibert chooses to edit his footage in a way that focuses on Julien's individual story and juxtaposes his struggles at home with those at school. This is far from an "objective" recording of reality in that pieces of footage have been edited together for the purpose of creating a specific image of Julien and rural life. Philibert makes the creative decision to share the physical sensations of being in the same rural setting as Julien. He also chooses to keep the attention

on the local and the individual without making a broader statement on the impacts of geographic isolation on education

Yet, not all of the shots of the countryside and landscape evoke a sense of isolation. In an interview, Philibert says he uses shots of the landscape in order to poetically create the message that Lopez's classroom is an enclave protecting students from the outside world (Abeel 20). Frequent long takes of the countryside create a whimsical feel and forge an image that is far from the misconception that rural schools are in trouble. Many of these bucolic images also create a sense of nostalgia for a rural way of life associated with traditional French values that is increasingly threatened by globalization and mechanization (Matthews 45). While some countryside shots indicate that isolation may be an issue, many contribute to the impression that the film lauds rural life and makes the viewer feel the beauty of the landscape.

***Un lycée pas comme les autres* and Personal Struggles**

Un lycée pas comme les autres (Barjol 2007) explores the innovative structure of Lycée Freyssinet, a school in the small town of Saint-Brieuc that is one of the only high schools to

specialize in all three types of high school education⁵. Many of the students at Freyssinet transferred from other schools where they had difficulties following the general education curriculum. Through a mix of interviews and observational fly-on-the-wall shots, we hear about their previous challenges and why they perform better at a school that has an innovative curriculum that combines technical studies, academic studies, and job training. The film provides a physical and embodied experience of daily life at Freyssinet. Barjol highlights the ways in which Freyssinet's non-traditional tracks and avoidance of a nationalized curriculum benefit individual students while only occasionally addressing the national-level consequences of standardization and centralization. Unlike *Être et avoir, Un lycée pas comme les autres* does not present an embodied experience of the entirety of these students' home and school lives. Throughout, the focus remains on the innovate structure and pedagogy of Freyssinet and stories of how this has benefited individual students.

⁵ One of the three major types of *lycées* in France is *lycée professionnel*, where students choose a specific profession for which they wish to receive training. Lycée Freyssinet also serves as a *lycée technique*, or technical high school. Lastly, part of the school is a traditional *lycée général*, which emphasizes academic subject areas and prepares students for university.

Most of the interviews focus on students' struggles in more traditional schools prior to attending Freyssinet. Barjol punctuates these interviews with transitional shots of everyday occurrences in order to provide an embodied experience of being in the school without providing commentary on social obstacles that caused students at Freyssinet to have difficulties in other schools. For instance, we see the daily happenings inside nearly a dozen spaces in the school before hearing commentary that indicates where the film takes place. The viewer is introduced to the school in the same way that a student walking inside would experience it, with all of its sights, sounds, and sensations. The opening shot shows students and teachers walking through a dark parking lot. The first sounds we hear are cars, coughing, and indistinct chatter. Between the coughing and the sight of a teacher's coattails blowing in the wind, the viewer can almost feel the dreariness. Once inside the school, we continue to experience the space as a student would. We watch and hear footsteps in a hallway before entering a math class. While in the classroom, the framing emphasizes students' physical actions with close-ups of hands moving compasses and another of a student writing on the board.

We then see several different workshops, and there are close-ups of machines and hands at work. A close-up of an angle

grinder shows sparks flying as well as the finesse and delicacy with which someone's hand directs the grinder. Not only does this shot engage multiple senses—sight, hearing, and touch—but it also creates a general atmosphere that inspires awe at the artwork and concentration of metalworking. The viewer is provided with no other context or explanation other than shots of different parts of the school and daily activities until about five and a half minutes into the film which is only fifty-eight minutes long.

The interview form used to tell students' stories also reveals how certain documentary techniques may be less capable of capturing the lived realities of the classroom than techniques of embodied spectatorship. Even the earliest documentary theorists believed that documentary is not an objective representation of reality. According to Grierson, the very person who coined the term documentary, every documentarian must make the creative choices of selecting aspects from real life and decide how to present them on screen (559-60). Grierson writes, "[y]ou may, like Flaherty, go for a story form, passing in the ancient manner from the individual to the environment, to the environment transcended or not transcended, to the consequent honours of heroism. Or you may not be so interested in the individual. You may think that the individual life is no longer

capable of cross-sectioning reality” (661)⁶. Although the aforementioned shots of everyday happenings show what appears to be an accurate picture of life in Freyssinet, they also reflect Barjol’s creative choice to provide an embodied experience without giving commentary or explanations on the interviews.

Barjol decides to represent students’ stories rather than larger social issues, and he opts almost exclusively for interviews and in front of the camera monologues. Even the rare ‘natural conversations’ take on the allure of staged interviews. For instance, it is difficult to determine if one scene, in which the gym teacher and one of his students, Stéphane, discuss Stéphane’s challenges at his previous school, is a conversation or a group interview. At certain moments, the two appear to be looking at each other and speaking directly to one another. At other times, however, the teacher talks about Stéphane in the third person as if he is not there. The two also say things that seem to be in response to a question that the viewer did not hear, suggesting

⁶ Other useful works on why documentary does not objectively reference the world include: *New Documentary* (Bruzzi, 2006), *The Subject of Documentary* (Renov 2004), *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Barnouw 1993), *Blurred Boundaries* (Nichols 1994), and *Representing Reality* (Nichols 1991).

that an interviewer is present. As a result, interviews like this one are sometimes disguised and appear to be a conversation recorded in an observational style rather than a creative, planned choice about how to structure students' stories.

Even though Barjol conceals his presence, the very inclusion of interviews implicates him in the events that unfold. The hierarchical structure of the interview and the power dynamics inherent in it mean that the interviewer is responsible for determining how the information gleaned from the interviewee is presented. In this case, Barjol presents the information in a manner that hides his involvement. Such a form of presenting interviews is what Bill Nichols calls a masked interview. The masked interview is when, "the filmmaker is both off screen and unheard. Equally significant, the interviewee no longer addresses the filmmaker offscreen but engages in conversation with another social actor" (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 51-52). These sorts of interviews can be difficult to discern from ordinary conversations. The major difference, however, is that it is clear that there is some sort of "implanted conversation" and that the conversation is somewhat planned. In this scene, the general flow of the conversation is unnatural, and it is obvious that Stéphane and the gym teacher know that the point of the discussion is to talk about the difficulties Stéphane had at

his former school. At other times, Stéphane and the teacher stop looking at each other and look to the side of the camera as if speaking to an interviewer. Despite the fact that the interviewer's presence is made evident with the subjects' line of sight, Barjol still seems to mask the interview with aesthetic strategies of fiction film such as sound bridges, which Nichols notes is common when masking an interview (52).

Other scenes consist of what appear to be monologues. For instance, one student speaks about his difficulties in traditional schools in an apparent monologue. His monologue begins with a cut from a shot of him working on an art project to a medium close-up of him standing alone and occupying about half the frame. The scene continues to cut back and forth between shots of the class and shots of this student giving his monologue, suggesting that the monologue is nothing more than a series of reflections that occurred organically during a lesson. In this case: "[t]he visible presence of the social actor as evidentiary witness and the visible absence of the filmmaker [...] gives the form of the interview the appearance of a 'pseudomonologue' [...] allowing witnesses 'to speak for themselves'" (54). Yet, there are visual and audible cues that indicate this is not a true monologue. The student looks at a point just left of camera, suggesting the presence of an interviewer. There is even a

moment in which he pauses as if waiting to see if the interviewer wants him to say more. The scene ends with a cut to a shot of a teacher that the student was describing in the pseudomonologue, and we still hear the student talking about this teacher at the start of the following scene. As with the masked interviews, this sound bridge is a borrowed fiction film strategy that makes the transition seem smooth and hides the presence of the director and the filmmaking process.

All of these strategies combined, whether they be the pseudomonologue, the masked interview, or the incorporation of fiction film aesthetics, conceal Barjol's presence and the structured interview form of students' reflections. At first glance, this creates an air of authenticity. Yet, an analysis of the planned structure of these reflections reveals that they are not objective recordings of students' thoughts. The transitional shots of daily life are a creative choice highlighting that any documentary involves subjectively selecting certain parts of reality and the form in which to represent them. As for the interviews, they seem to make a pointed intervention in conversations on education intended specifically to highlight issues of curriculum standardization and the devaluing of technical education. Larger questions of race, class, and geography are generally overlooked in favor of interviews

foregrounding questions of curriculum and over-standardization through the prism of individual students' experiences. By only focusing on a limited number of issues, Barjol does not reproduce the false narrative that rural schools are plagued with problems.

Mon maître d'école: Narrative and Documentary

The final documentary to be analyzed, *Mon maître d'école*, (Thérond 2016) as a strong a narrative arch and character development. Thérond follows her former elementary school teacher, Monsieur Burel, and his students in a one-room schoolhouse during Burel's final year teaching before retirement. Thérond tells the interpersonal stories of students and their teacher and avoids broader comment on the French school system. In an interview, Thérond was asked if she thought her film was too idyllic and optimistic given that it does not address any of the problems people usually think of when discussing education. She responded, "[l]e film est un cas particulier d'une ancienne élève devenue réalisatrice, qui a envie de montrer les

choses positives qu'un enseignant peut apporter à un enfant."⁷ Given her desire to tell a personal story about a teacher she admires, the film paints a heart-melting picture of Burel's preparation for retirement.

We learn Burel's life story, and, consequently, he becomes a protagonist with a certain level of character development as he becomes more and more emotional towards the end of the year. This highlights how, [w]hen documentaries represent people, they do not offer a transparent record of 'who they really are,' but rather a constructed representation: in other words, a characterization." (Plantinga 115).⁸ In this case, Théron is representing Burel as how she thinks he should be remembered after retirement. In several different moments, we hear her talk about her fond memories of Burel, and it is clear that this documentary's main premise is showing the world Burel's positive impact as an educator.

⁷ This interview was never published and is part of Burel's personal archive. He gave me permission to use portions of it for this project.

⁸ For a more in-depth analysis on the complex relationship between characterization and the expectation that documentaries create an "objective" recording of someone as they really are see: *Documentary Filmmaking, A Contemporary Field Guide* (Hewitt and Vazquez 2014), "9 Filmmakers Tell us What Makes the Perfect Documentary Character" (Greene et al. 2014), and "Poetics of the Documentary Film Interview" (Grindon 2007).

At two points, however, Thérond does address questions of race, moving beyond the narrative of Burel's retirement. The first time that race is mentioned is when one student complains to Monsieur urel that he is being bullied for being Chinese. Here, racism is framed as a behavior problem specific to a small group of students and not as part of larger structural issues. According to Mathieu Macheret, Thérond's film is devoid of conflicts and tends to idealize rural schools in a nostalgic way that represents them as a final bastion of traditional republican values. Macheret describes this classroom as, "une petite bulle imperméable du monde extérieur [...] Au milieu du tableau, l'instituteur trône en figure d'exemplarité, sorte de héros discret et indiscutable de l'esprit républicain, diffusant ses valeurs" (1). In this case, the racist bullying is presented as nothing more than typical child behavior. Burel scolds the students and then talks about *how l'école républicaine* respects all religions and all people. He then tells the students who insulted the Chinese boy that he would like them to make up and shake hands. He says learning how to make peace is an important life lesson and that they will see how important this is later in their lesson on WWI. Shortly after, we see the scene described in the introduction where Burel goes to a WWI memorial with his class. The placement of this patriotic scene immediately after Burel used a lesson on WWI to

teach his students to be accepting and tolerant of cultural differences reflects Macheret's thinking that Burel's classroom is an idyllic image of the rural school valiantly upholding the values of the Republic.

Race and national origin arise once more when Burel speaks with a student who is upset about how he thinks he will never return to his home country, South Korea. Burel tells the student that he is sure he will go to South Korea someday if he puts his mind to it. The conversation then changes subject, and the student's difficulties are never again addressed. Rather than exploring the ways in which being separated from one's culture and country can become an educational disadvantage, Thérond represents the teacher as someone who easily reconciles the anxieties arising from cultural differences in one conversation. The following scene shows Burel marking the heights of his students on the wall as he always does at the end of the year, and he then marks his height symbolizing that this year he too is advancing to the next stage of life. Thus, the film quickly passes over questions of race and immigration in order to return to the story of the final days of Burel's career.

Mon maître d'école, however, does analyze the difficulties that arise out of having a school that consists of a *classe unique* in detail. The first classroom scene shows Monsieur Burel

struggling with having many grades and spending a great deal of time trying to sit students who are in the same grade together. Later, while giving a dictation, Burel has the younger students stop before the older students, and we see the younger students idly wait for the older ones to finish. Alpe and Fauguet note that many researchers and the general public mistakenly believe that since the teacher has to work with several groups of students at once, he or she often puts students in groups to work on their own, thus increasing their level of autonomy and creativity (Alpe and Fauguet 168-69). When looking at the results of standardized tests, however, "l'observation des résultats des élèves des écoles à classe unique tempère cet optimisme, puisque les résultats sont plutôt inférieurs à ceux des classes à trois niveaux" (169). Thérond, however, does not suggest that student performance is a concern with having a classe unique. Whereas these scenes indicate that it may be a stressful time management issue for the teacher, it does not seem to negatively impact students.

Alpe and Fauguet also explain that having the same teacher from the start to the end of elementary school can be detrimental. Students who remain with the same teacher for several years do not learn how to adapt to a wide variety of pedagogical methods, which can prove challenging in middle

school when they have many teachers (165). As is the case in *Être et avoir*, this problem is reflected throughout *Mon maître d'école* as Burel has conversations with upset students who will be going to middle school next year. Since he is retiring, even those remaining in the same school seem stressed by the idea of having a new teacher. Being so attached to Monsieur Burel may make adjusting to new teachers more difficult than it is for children who do not attend a one room school. Yet, Thérond does not present the close relationship as problematic and instead weaves it into her narrative that Burel has a profound and positive impact on students.

Rural School through the Conventions of Fictional Cinema

In a similar manner, *Ça commence aujourd'hui* (Tavernier 1999) also highlights the personal story of a protagonist, resulting in the film veering away from an embodied representation of the classroom. Tavernier tells the story of Daniel Lefebvre, a teacher and principal in a small, declining industrial town. We watch Lefebvre confront issues such as poverty, a lack of resources, out-of-touch administration, and

substance abuse. Tavernier paints a bleak picture and often reproduces public and official discourse that claims rural schools underperform. This seems to confirm Levine's argument that fiction is more likely to address the shortcomings of *l'Éducation nationale*. According to her, classroom documentaries do not create a pessimistic image of public education because they, "[follow] a small group of characters, avoiding verbal, textual, or statistical argumentation in favor of a focus on students and student experience" (Levine 105). While it is true that Tavernier uses more argumentation be it in the form of dialogues about the state of education or scenes featuring political speeches, this likely is not inherent to the documentary/fiction divide. One only need to look at popular English-language documentaries such as *Waiting for Superman* and *Race to Nowhere* to see that persuasion through oral arguments and statistics can enter into the realm of classroom documentaries and is not reserved only for fiction. Instead, avoiding the exposition of any central argument is a choice that documentarians and fiction filmmakers alike make.

Ça commence aujourd'hui paints such a worrisome picture of rural education for the same reason that *Mon maître d'école* appears to be overly idyllic; both have a strong narrative arc with a protagonist at the center and a specific message to convey.

Consequently, there are fewer scenes that provide an embodied experience of ordinary learning moments and allow the viewer to feel and experience both the strengths and weaknesses of rural education. The narrative structure resembles that of most feature-length fictions with a problem that will drive the plot and a protagonist who will fight to redress this problem. In this case, the problem is that of the economic hardship of a small town at the end of the 20th century as it struggles to adjust to a loss of industry, and the person to solve this problem is Lefebvre. The story then follows Lefebvre as he faces challenges throughout the course of a school year such as abusive families, a school break-in, and unresponsive bureaucracy. We learn about Lefebvre's personal life and come to be invested in wanting him to succeed in improving the lives of his students. As is typical of fictional cinema, Lefebvre serves as the hero who is the center of attention. In the words of Mandlebaum, "son sujet pourrait se résumer à cette question: peut-on faire d'un directeur de maternelle du Nord un héros de cinéma Classique?" (1). Like many fictional works, the film's ending seems to suggest the story has come full-circle and ends in a similar way to which the film began, with a poetic voice-over of Daniel reading a text he wrote himself and beautiful yet melancholic shots of the landscape.

Having a clear narrative arc results in fewer scenes showing ordinary learning moments that give the viewer a feel for the classroom and more scenes depicting meetings and conversations about the ways *l'Éducation nationale* has let down children in poor, rural communities and how Daniel Lefebvre intends to intervene. Perhaps the best example of how *Ça commence aujourd'hui* favors commenting on social issues is a scene in which we see an elected official speak at a banquet. This scene begins with the politician speaking in front of a large crowd and standing in front of a majestic painting that fills up the entire wall. The camera is placed in the middle of the crowd, creating the impression that we are watching a spectacle from a distance without feeling what it is like to be in this space. In fact, the technique of either placing the camera within crowds or showing shots of crowds is used throughout the film and often creates a distance between the viewer and the characters. Even once the camera cuts to a shot that is closer to the politician, he is shown from a low-angle shot, making him look intimidating and still quite far away. After the speech, a social worker talks to a group of people about how angry she is about cuts to the budget for social programs like daycare and family planning. Here, the camera pans back and forth in a semi-circle around the woman as she delivers a long diatribe. While this creates a

powerful dramatic effect, it does not form a connection between the viewer and the characters through embodied spectatorship. Scenes like this keep the viewer outside of the realities of the classroom, and we are only exposed to the official discourse which is often replete with stereotypes and clichés of failing rural schools.

When the film leaves the realm of official discourse, it often comments on either real or perceived issues in education through the use of highly cinematic dramatic action. For example, the moment in which Daniel learns that the school will no longer provide meals to students who do not have lunch money is presented in a way that highlights the drama and tension of this news. After learning the news, we see Daniel running down an alleyway towards the camera in a fit of anger. The next shot shows him again running towards the camera as he enters the mayor's office to argue about this decision. There is no form of embodiment here as Daniel runs to city hall. We do not experience the sprint through the streets with him. Instead, the two shots of him running quickly at the camera make it seem as if he is throwing his anger at the viewer. During his argument with the mayor, there are a series of shot-counter-shots that underscore the tension. Daniel then relays this news to one of his student's parents, Madame Henri, who has not been

paying for lunch, and we see the fear on her face. The next shot is accompanied with suspenseful music as Daniel drives and takes notes on his steering wheel, depicting him as a hero who constantly works to remedy the problems in his school. The music becomes more melancholic in the following shot that shows Madame Henri leaving her house and walking into a dark ally in the rain. Here, the *mise-en-scène* allows the viewer to share in her misery.

There are, however, certain moments in which Tavernier borrows from the documentary mode. Phillippe Royer notes, “[r]éaliste, le nouveau film de Bertrand Tavernier expose les immenses difficultés auxquelles fait face un directeur d'école, au quotidien [...] Fiction n'est d'ailleurs pas le terme le plus approprié pour *Ça commence aujourd'hui*, puisqu'il y a une grosse part de documentaire, de réalité reconstituée (2).” In fact, much of the dramatic action is punctuated with scenes of ordinary learning moments that are shot in the fly-on-the wall style of observational documentary. The aesthetics are unpolished, and there is minimal editing or *mise-en-scène*, giving the impression that we are watching lessons as they naturally unfold. In the first of many faculty meetings, the camera functions as a fly-on-the wall as we witness the conversation between the teachers. Yet, the camera is almost always behind the circle of teachers who are

having the meeting, giving a sense of separation between the viewer and the characters. While these scenes may not be constructed in an overly cinematic or dramatic manner, we are literally and figurately placed outside of the group. Moreover, the dialogue is clearly written in a way that contributes to the film's overall narrative of Daniel standing up to an unresponsive government and bureaucracy that is not adequately addressing the issues in this town. Teachers list off problems including lice, broken toilets, and oversized classes. Daniel again appears to be a hero when he says that he will ignore his responsibilities as principal and not report the teachers when they say they want to circulate a petition.

Similar to how Thérond incorporates some of the techniques of fiction to propel her narrative about Monsieur Burel, Philibert appropriates some of the aesthetic strategies of documentary to further both the film's plotline revolving around Daniel and the commentary that rural schools are in danger. Graeme Turner's concept of what he calls a textual approach to the relationship between film and culture is useful for understanding the intervention that Tavernier is making in

discussions on the shortcomings of rural education.⁹ A textual approach to understand how a film relates to the culture in which it was produced entails, “operating on the assumption of the culture’s ‘authorship’ of the text, they trace the myths or ideologies of the films back to their sources within the culture” (179). Following this logic, Tavernier seems to address collective anxieties in France surrounding rural education. Therefore, he does not provide a feeling of embodied spectatorship but rather presents a series of dramatic scenes addressing a wide array of perceived problems with rural schooling. All of these issues are highlighted in the context of the story of a heroic teacher, which further distances *Ça commence aujourd’hui* from any form of embodied spectatorship that recreates all of the sensations of a classroom.

Conclusion

These four films highlight both the diversity of opinions on rural education and a full range of its strengths and weaknesses.

⁹ As examples of works that use this approach, Turner cites *Six-Guns and Society* (Wright 1975), “*Entertainment and Utopia*” (Dyer 1977), and “*Notes on film noir*” (Schrader 1972).

From Tavernier's pessimistic image of a rural school plagued with countless problems to Thérond's documentary about a school in a small village that functions almost perfectly, we are exposed to both France's hopes and fears relating to rural schooling. Paul Monaco summarizes cinema's relationship to society's perceptions of important issues such as education by stating, "films become - at least hypothetically - a potential source of information about the shared, collective concerns of the group to which those films appeal," (2) and adds "[t]he popularity of a film [...] arises on the whole from the adaptation of its contents to the dominant thoughts, conceptions, and instinctual wishes of contemporary society" (4). As these works demonstrate, the task of imagining and representing society's anxieties and wishes is not only reserved for fiction, further supporting the claim that the documentary/fiction divide is porous at best. More significantly, these films deepen our understanding of this claim that has been made since the earliest days of documentary and highlight certain strategies that best allow fiction and documentary alike to be as close as possible to representing lived realities. Given the nature of the classroom, having a strong narrative arch with a prominent protagonist will likely lead directors away from the experiences of school children. This is because the story of a school year usually does

not have the classic narrative arch of problem, climax, and resolution. While one could argue that the teacher is the protagonist of any classroom, this type of protagonist still does not have to face an enemy or seemingly insurmountable obstacles and conflicts as a fictional one would.

This is not to say that embodied spectatorship is the only cinematic strategy that can shed light on school. Rather, this study deepens our understanding of the nebulous division between documentary and fiction and shows how the strategy of embodied spectatorship seems to form a perfect pairing with the particularities of the classroom to bring forth the lived experiences of students and educators. Although it is beyond the scope of this project, an analysis of the few moments in which *Ça commence aujourd'hui/hui* uses embodied spectatorship and has a realist feel would further underscore how fiction and documentary have the same capacity to share ordinary yet authentic happenings of the classroom with the world. If a filmmaker, whether she work with documentary or fiction, wants to allow spectators to truly feel what it is like to be part of *l'Éducation nationale*, then providing an embodied experience with little commentary on broad socio-political issues is likely the most efficient strategy. On the other hand, constructing a narrative driven by a central protagonist is perhaps more useful

for making a specific intervention in public debates on education and addressing France's hopes, concerns, and fears relating to school.

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