Lucy Fischer and Patrice Petro, editors

Teaching Film

413pp. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2012

(Options For Teaching series)

Review by Alexis Bennett

As reviews editor of this journal I am often sent books which deal with an area of film studies, or musicology, or sound studies, but which do not primarily address the intersection of those subjects and might therefore be deemed to be of secondary relevance to these pages. However, occasionally works of that more singular nature might be considered to be of special interest, and *Teaching Film,* edited by Lucy Fischer and Patrice Petro, is one such. My reasoning: many readers of *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* will hold teaching posts in universities, music colleges or schools. A significant proportion of these readers might teach an aspect of media music, music for screen, film musicology, film sound or any variation on these. That *Teaching Film* has only one article that deals specifically with film music pedagogy, and one on teaching film sound, does not trouble me particularly, because this volume is valuable and indeed informative in several pertinent respects, and – some editorial shortcomings notwithstanding - will be of great interest to anyone working in a field of education which deals with cinema either directly or indirectly.

The introduction notes that whilst there is a substantial literature on film teaching, the field lacks a single comprehensive volume. The editors also mention that classes on film have been offered (in US universities) in one form or another since 1915; nearly a century later this book is well overdue. Closing the introduction is a list of tips with an Allenesque title, 'Practical Pedagogy: Everything You Wanted to Know about Teaching Media but Were Afraid to Ask' (9). This provides some essential advice in preparing for classes that involve an audio-visual aspect, some of which will bring a bitter smile of recognition to those who have learned the hard way. For example, they remind us that checking whether the room you have booked not only has audio-visual equipment that actually works is only half the task: you need to make sure the windows have blinds so that the films can actually be seen. Full marks to the editors for being so practical in their advice, before the academic bulk of the book has begun.

Teaching Film is divided into six parts, 'Theory and Representation', 'Geographies of Cinema', 'Interdisciplinarities', 'Genre and Mode', 'Style and Craft', and 'Film and Media in the Digital Age'; each is introduced by the editors and each contains between five and seven articles. My attention was naturally first drawn to 'Style and Craft', since it features an article by Caryl Flinn, 'Teaching Film Music', but pieces in other parts of the book are of interest, including Steven Cohan's 'Teaching Film Genre', which deals with his courses on the film musical, and James F. Lastra's 'Teaching Film Sound'.

There will not be much that is new to film music scholars in Flinn's piece, which briefly summarises literature from the early work of Kurt London and Adorno & Eisler right through to Claudia Gorbman and Kathryn Kalinak and other recent and notable writers like Jeff Smith and Richard Dyer. She tethers her article to the wider project by reminding us that music can be a key signifier of genre or location in time or place, and a flexible tool in driving narrative and mood. In describing the standard class experiment – revisited in various forms by film music pedagogues everywhere – wherein the same stretch of film is shown several times with different musical accompaniment, her aim is to reinforce the power of music in the reception of film, within a Film Studies context. (Flinn is once careless in her facts: she mentions *Pulp Fiction*'s use of the song “Stuck in the Middle with You” when she almost certainly means *Reservoir Dogs* (281)).

James F. Lastra writes lucidly on film sound, drawing on case studies including the famous sequence in *The Birds* wherein the eponymous creatures chase the schoolchildren down the street. To the uninitiated in film sound analysis Lastra illuminates those things that might be taken for granted, like the immense variety of techniques and approaches by which a single sound might be recorded, manipulated, and finally reproduced, and the fact that sounds might also be discussed in terms of 'focus', 'foreground', and so on; he rightly credits Rick Altman as an author to whom teachers in this field should refer.

A stand-out article for me was Neepa Majumdar's 'Teaching Indian Cinema', which begins with a refreshing reminder of the size, variety and reach of India's film output, a fact which is so often ignored in the Western academy, either due to the absence of Indian cinema from mainstream marketing in the west, or because its

otherness interferes with our conception of what cinema 'is'; indeed Majumdar confronts such presumptive attitudes in his article. Whilst acknowledging that trying to design an all-inclusive course covering even one national cinema is unrealistic (see my comments on Dudley Andrew's article below), Majumdar makes the case for at least introducing a careful touch when presenting Indian cinema, according it the attention it deserves and warning against generalisation. He states that “Indian cinema has been the other dominant mainstream cinema against which various counter-cinemas have struggled, including India's own regional cinemas and its art cinema. Because Indian cinema exemplifies an alternative type of hegemonic cinematic form, it presents an opportunity to defamiliarize the idea of Hollywood as the worldwide norm for mainstream cinema.” (92) His article also serves to debunk some myths about Indian cinema which might still be held by many educators not familiar with it, including the assumptions surrounding the use of the term 'Bollywood' (the principal one being that it refers to Indian cinema in general, which it most emphatically must not). Further, this article identifies the problems of access to films that such a huge industry presents.

Interesting articles appear on teaching film and disability (which highlights the odd fixation that cinema – particularly western filmmaking – can have with disability as either ennobling and brave or creepy and horrible), film and race, and film and women's studies. The latter piece, by Maureen Turim, emerges as a concise and invaluable literature review for those who teach film in a feminist context. Turim's observations on how to encourage students to reach beyond their initial reactions as receivers of film are interesting:

“Successful courses on women and film must take into account, then move beyond, the enunciations so prevalent in class discussions: 'I liked or admired' versus 'I hated or found repulsive' a given character, image or action. These comments will recur; each time they should be taken as an opportunity to delve more deeply into the film and its context.” (41)

Practitioners in various film-related disciplines can take this statement as a starting point for good teaching: the challenging of reductive language and thought must surely be of paramount importance for teaching at degree level. In fact, in my reading I linked this statement to Peter Decherney's contribution on the teaching of film law and policy. In it, he covers not only the legal disputes around issues like piracy and censorship,

but also how these things might influence the filmmaking process. For me, students need to understand that their views on artistic works are based on assumptions and cultural filters (cf Turim), which – when taken to their extremes, can lead to censorship. He mentions Chinese and Iranian cinema as key examples in how the creative process finds interesting alternatives in creation and/or distribution in a censored environment.

Dudley Andrew's contribution, 'Teaching World Cinema', asks crucial questions about the names we give our courses, the vocabulary we use and its implications. What, he asks, is the difference between *world* cinema and *global* cinema? Are *world* cinema and *arthouse* the same thing for western audiences? He observes that "[i]n the United States, *foreign film* has always been a code word for deep realism, daring or difficult narratives, and taboo topics." (150). This will feel familiar to those who teach film or any related discipline, including music and the moving image. American mainstream codes are all too often the norm for our students, from which other traditions deviate and dissent.

Fascinating for the reader who teaches a university course are the frequent descriptions of how courses develop from year to year, or how they might be adapted when a lecturer moves to a different institution. Teachers move and take their courses with them, or courses stay whilst teachers move, which necessitates a handover period which can be difficult for all concerned. That these logistics are mentioned and discussed is comforting: one finds the same issues arising for teachers of many contrasting programmes of study.

One major drawback of the book is scarcely the fault of its editors or its contributors: before the ink had dried on the first copies of this volume off the press, online streaming was still developing and is indeed still growing and changing. The age of Netflix, Lovefilm and other streaming platforms is young, and the articles in the chapter 'Film and Teaching in the Digital Age' already seem slightly outdated in their flimsy – or entirely absent – discussion of this technology. In the introduction, the editors rightly flag up the fact that archiving in film scholarship lacks depth and consistency compared to other disciplines; again, new methods for preserving film materials are emerging online and in the e-resources departments of libraries as I write.

There are also moments in the text which don't ring true, such as Dudley Andrew's declaration that "we constantly live alongside television, whereas we choose to go out to the movies, leaving home and paying to

enter an alternative space". (149) Whilst Andrew does earlier acknowledge the growth of home-based film viewing, this sentence reads as rather old-fashioned. Feature films are watched everywhere now, on multiple platforms and devices, so films are no longer confined to the "alternative space" of the cinema, and are not necessarily designed to be. Film has also lost many talented writers to longform television in recent years, bestowing that medium the kind of respect once reserved for serious filmmaking. This blurs the boundaries of viewing contexts further.

No doubt new media will continue to emerge which may entirely invalidate much of what is written here about the technology available to teachers. But this difficulty actually highlights one of the strengths of the book, that many of its writers constantly discuss resources and access to the films themselves. How do you teach the cinema of a certain country if you can't find copies of the films in any format? How do you include a representative work if there are no English subtitled versions? In this respect, the editors seem to have reined in their contributors to target the practicalities of teaching. However, more generally, there seems to be a certain imbalance in the approaches of the various authors: some adhere closely to the brief of writing about the process of teaching their subject, and their findings in the field, whilst others choose to devote much of their allotted space to *describing* their subject to the reader, which this reviewer finds out of place. By way of demonstration, compare David Desser's excellent overview of Japanese cinema, with Garrett Stewart's equally impressive 'Literature and Film – Not Literature on Film'. The former could happily sit among similar surveys of national cinemas in a less pedagogical publication, since it rarely discusses in detail the logistical challenges of teaching, whilst the latter painstakingly describes the evolution of a course as it moves between institutions and responds to a changing cultural landscape. Stewart's great contribution here is that one can find fruitful course materials by comparing things that wouldn't ordinarily be subject to comparison: he has used *Wuthering Heights* in its original novel form placed alongside *Citizen Kane,* to highlight common narrative techniques ("refracted or prismatic mix of biographical perspectives" (165)) that can cross media boundaries.

Some editorial decisions seem strange, for example, the insistence on the valid but clumsy usage of "Web site" instead of the slicker and now near-ubiquitous "website". The introduction mentions "Blue-Ray" [sic], but that spelling is corrected in a later chapter. The references at the end of each article are also inconsistently

presented, some of them usefully listing films among the written and other sources, but others not.

This collection of essays reminds us that our teaching of cinema and its crafts need not be confined to the cinema that we encounter at the quotidian level in our multiplexes or on our TV channels or streaming services; for all of these platforms are selective to varying degrees. These writers implore us to look beyond, into the far reaches of filmmaking, to find our material. And there is a confessional tone to some of the writing, which is endearing. The authors admit to poorly structured courses or classes which had to be rebuilt, and confide in the reader about students who emerge from a lecture more baffled by the subject than when they entered the room. Early in the book, Edward Branigan states what we all know, but must always remember: students tend to forget most of what they 'learn' on university courses, but it is the process and the discipline that matters. He also reminds us that “a filmmaker [doesn't] need to know film theory to make films, just as a speaker of English need not know linguistics to use language.” (27) By placing Branigan's article near the opening of their volume, the editors have declared a philosophy of teaching that resonates through this worthwhile project.