

FEMININITY IN FILMS:  
Presentation of female teachers in school movies

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Femininity in Films: Presentation of female teachers in school movies

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Koulumaailmaan sijoittuvat ja sitä kuvaavat elokuvat ovat todella yleisiä, ja yleensä niissä keskeisessä roolissa on opettaja ja hänen toimintansa koulussa oppilaiden ja muiden kollegojen kanssa. Opettajat elokuvissa on aihe, jota on tutkittu aiemmin jonkin verran tosin melko yleisellä tasolla erittelemättä esimerkiksi eri sukupuolta edustavia opettajia.

Elokuville esiintyviä opettajahahmoja on tutkittu jaotteleamalla heidät hyviin ja huonoihin opettajiin sen perusteella, millaisiksi heidät kuvataan ja millaisia piirteitä heihin yhdistetään. Näitä piirteitä on tutkittu kiinnittämällä huomiota esimerkiksi siihen, millainen suhde opettajalla on oppilaisiin ja millainen hänen roolinsa on luokkahuoneessa. Lisäksi on tutkittu opettajan suhdetta kollegoihin ja sitä, miten hän opettaa. Esimerkiksi opetussuunnitelmasta poikkeaminen ja oppilaiden tarpeiden ja mielenkiinnon kohteiden selvittäminen yhdistetään usein hyvään opettajaan. Kouluelokuvia tutkittaessa on kiinnitetty huomiota myös siihen, kuvataanko opettajan yksityiselämää vai pidetäänkö se katsojalta salassa.

Vaikka opettajia elokuvissa on tutkittu, erityistä huomiota naisopettajiin ei ole aiemmin kohdistettu. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, kuinka naisopettajia kuvataan koulumaailmaan sijoittuvissa elokuvissa. Aineistona käytettiin kahta elokuvaa eri vuosikymmeniltä, elokuvaa *Up the Down Staircase* vuodelta 1967 ja elokuvaa *Dangerous Minds* vuodelta 1995. Elokuville tehtiin laadullinen tutkimus, jossa tutkittiin opettajan suhdetta oppilaisiin ja kollegoihin, opettajan yksityiselämän kuvaamista ja opettajan roolia luokkahuoneessa sekä hänen rooliaan vanhemman mallina. Lopuksi elokuvia vertailtiin ja tutkittiin, miten eri naisopettajaan liitettävät ominaisuudet ja hänen kuvaamisensa elokuvassa ovat muuttuneet eri vuosikymmenillä.

Tutkimuksen tulokset tukivat teoriaa opettajien jakamisesta hyviin ja huonoihin, ja elokuvien opettajat voitiin helposti luokitella hyviksi opettajiksi. Heissä oli myös yllättävän paljon samanlaisia piirteitä, ja myös tapa kuvata naisopettajia oli molemmissa elokuvissa varsin samanlainen. Kouluelokuvissa on siis olemassa tiettyjä stereotyyppioita, joista osa yhdistetään usein myös naishahmoihin. Yllättävää oli myös se, kuinka samankaltaisia kaksi vertailtavaa elokuvaa olivat, vaikka toinen on tehty lähes 30 vuotta aiemmin kuin toinen.

Asiasanat: teachers in movies, female teachers, school movies

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The American film industry has noticed the popularity of school films and several movies have been produced which take place in a school describing the everyday life of the school community. The focus is often on teachers, and, according to Dalton (2004: 16-41), school films present them either as good teachers, who are devoted to their work and genuinely care about their students, or as bad teachers, who are not motivated to teach and lack empathy towards their students. The categories of good and bad teachers are important, since they strongly define the nature of the school film and the picture the movie gives about the teaching profession. Also the description of the teachers' social lives, that is, whether the social life of a teacher is shown or not in the school movies, has been investigated (Trier 2001).

There are several different characteristics associated with teachers in school movies. Moreover, there are certain characteristics associated with especially female teachers. Thus, school movies can be analyzed in order to find out what these characteristics are, how common they are in different films, whether the movies describe female teachers stereotypically or not and what kind of picture they give to viewer about female teachers.

School movies have clearly changed in the course of time, and movies produced in different decades can be rather different. Also the description of teachers, and particularly female teachers, has changed, since the attitudes towards women are different nowadays than for instance 30 years ago.

Teachers in movies is a topic which has been studied by several researchers (for instance Bauer 1998, Bradshaw 2008, Dalton 2004 and Trier 2001). However, the point of view of previous research has been teachers in movies in general, and for instance the concepts of good and bad teacher (Dalton 2004). Thus, little research about specifically female teachers in movies has been done. As a consequence, the purpose of the present study is to analyze two different school movies, *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995), in order to find out how the female teachers are presented in these school movies, what characteristics are associated with them and whether the two teachers in the movies share similar characteristics despite the fact that the movies are from two different decades.

Moreover, the present study can be associated with women's studies, since as Erens (1990: 2) states, feminist film theory and criticism emerged in the early seventies in order to understand sexism in films and to encourage positive attitudes towards womanhood and an optimistic view about social change. The purpose of the present study is to find out whether the films contain sexist stereotypes about female teachers and whether the features associated with the female teachers are positive or not.

## **2 GOOD OR BAD, FEMININE OR UNFEMININE –THE CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHERS IN THE MOVIES**

### **2.1 Concepts of femininity, sex and gender**

I will focus particularly on analysing how female teachers are presented in school movies. This is why I am focusing on *femininity* and the feminine characteristics described in the movies.

According to Gauntlett (2002: 10), femininity is not necessarily seen as the state of being a woman, but it is perceived more as a stereotype of a woman's role from the past decades and centuries.

These stereotypes play a remarkable role in the media and popular culture and they affect also the way people think, their opinions and possible prejudices.

The modern women might not be worried about fitting their identity with the idea of femininity, and femininity is not the core value for women nowadays. On the contrary, femininity is something that a woman can choose to employ in her everyday life – perhaps for pleasure or sometimes even to achieve a particular goal. On the other hand, the traditional ways of thinking are still present today, and a woman can be even criticized for her lack of femininity. However, it is the woman's choice whether she wants to show or emphasize her own femininity (ibid.).

It is also necessary to distinguish the terms *sex* and *gender*. According to Carter and Steiner (2004: 3), gender is a social construction rather than a 'natural' fact. Thus, gender cannot be inferred straight from the sexual difference between male and female, and it cannot be assumed that there are universal and homogeneous definitions of gender which would apply in all cultures across the world.

### **2.2 The influences of popular culture and time on the interpretations of school movies**

Even though there are some stereotypical characteristics associated with school and teachers, also my own experiences and opinions might affect how I interpret the movies. According to Dalton (2004: 2), for instance the general knowledge that people have about the relationship between a teacher and a student is created by constructs of popular culture that is played out in the mass media. The knowledge is not based on only personal experiences and anecdotal conversations with others about their own personal experiences, but it is modified specifically by the popular culture.

Another important factor that Dalton (2004: 3) states is that films not only support multiple interpretations but that those meanings interpreted by the viewer will also change over

time. Basically this means that people living in other decades will probably interpret the same movie differently. In addition, it can also be related to the fact that the meanings conveyed in films have changed and will change; in other words, the same topic can be handled radically different in two different movies from different decades. This is why I want to compare two movies that are from different decades, *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995).

### **2.3 Teachers in movies and their relationship to other people**

Teachers in movies is a topic that has been somewhat studied in the 1990s and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bradshaw (2008) emphasizes one very typical feature in school movies: the social lives of both the teacher and the students outside the school are hidden. In other words, the teacher does not know his or her pupils outside the classroom, and the pupils do not know their teacher. However, if in the movie the private lives of either the teacher or the pupils are revealed in the classroom, it usually leads to drama. Trier (2001: 131-139) has also studied school films and he divides them into two categories according to how they present teachers and their personal lives: those movies in which the teacher is presented mainly professionally and not much of his or her social life is described and the movies in which also the teacher's personal life is somewhat described. The movies of the first category represent teachers as if they did not have personal lives at all and usually their work is the reason for their nonexistent social lives outside the school. In the films of the second category, in turn, it is often the teachers' personal lives that affect their work and sometimes cause even conflicts in the school community.

Trier (2001: 133) states that many of the school films of the second category create a certain image of the teachers, often as heroic and omniscient professionals. The films affect "the Public Imagination": they shape the societal expectations and perceptions of what it means to be a teacher. One of Trier's pre-service students watched three films in which the teachers were presented as "saviours" and stated: "---the teacher comes in, gets rid of the textbooks, and uses his [or her] charisma and "gift" for teaching to save kids who are heading nowhere---".

Also Dalton (2004: 82-103) points out the divided lives of teachers. She examines especially female teachers, who are often presented as caring and nurturing and even as mother figures. The division between the personal and professional lives of a female teacher is distinctive, since for instance historically the woman teacher has been forced to choose between nurturing other children as a teacher and having children of her own. This seems rather unbelievable nowadays, but it has been reality before. There is still a clear division between the "mysterious" personal life and

the more public professional life of the female teacher and this division is emphasized in the movies. Bauer (1998: 300-317) pays attention to the sexual characteristics given to teachers in Hollywood films. He states that these films deny the reality of teaching since they claim that the real work of the teacher takes place “off stage” rather than in the classroom. Moreover, the teacher is often described as a role model and especially as a parental model.

It is also worth paying attention to the relationship between the female teacher and her students and co-workers and how these relationships are described in the movies. The language of the film is an effective way of finding out which characteristics are associated with the women teachers. According to Holmes (2005: 43), there is an assumption that especially female co-workers should act in a certain way and always obey their superiors without any hesitation. On the other hand, both women and men have their own typical ways of conversing and speaking (Holmes 2005: 53-56). I assume that as in teacher films in general, also in films with women teachers there are teachers that do not want to follow for instance the curriculum strictly and this may cause some conflicts with other teachers and the principal. In these situations it is interesting to find out whether the gender of the teacher affects the interaction between co-workers.

#### **2.4 The Hollywood Curriculum – Good and bad teachers**

Dalton (2004: 1-21) presents her idea about *the Hollywood curriculum*. This curriculum is constructed by popular culture through the movies which present the relationship between the teacher and the students. This social curriculum relies more on individual than collective action and is based mostly on the carefully plotted action seen in these films. Moreover, Dalton’s views support Trier’s idea of “Public Imagination”. According to Dalton (2004: 16-41), in Hollywood school films there is a distinctively clear division into “good teachers” and “bad teachers”. This is one part of Dalton’s idea of the Hollywood curriculum. A “good teacher” is usually an outsider who is not liked by other teachers. The feeling and conception of being an outsider can relate to social status, educational status or race, especially among the class. The other teachers are usually either bored by the students or afraid of them and very often unbelievably eager to dominate them and use their power as teachers, whereas the “good teacher” is involved with the students on a personal level and learns from them. This means that the “good teacher” is usually closer to her students than to other teachers and the teacher student relationship often includes also some type of rule breaking, which benefits the student and makes the relationship between the teacher and the student more open. It is also common that “good teachers” learn some valuable lesson from their students or a

particular student. A typical lesson is that the teacher really can make a difference, but sometimes the lessons can be also much smaller.

The good teacher usually does not have a good relationship with different administrators and he or she can be seen as some sort of rebel. Usually he or she also shares a similar sense of humour with the students, so he or she is easy to approach. The “good teacher” does not always follow the curriculum but makes his or her own choices in order to meet the needs of the students and to truly make them interested in the subject he or she is teaching. The teachers often have conflicts with administrators over their own unconventional teaching methods and the reluctance to be under the different supervisors’ control. The different teaching methods that the good teachers use might reveal some sort of underlying curricular philosophy that the teacher has. The teachers put themselves at risk and are ready to be seen as rebels in the eyes of the administrators. However, their main idea in all this is to find a “social curriculum” that is closer to their students’ everyday lives and helps them to learn in a way that is easier and more suitable for them. Bauer (1998: 304) refers also to this “rebel type” of teacher, who breaks the rules and whose rebellious and entertaining persona might mask his or her radical authoritarianism.

Dalton (2004: 39) states that even though the good teachers are not perfect, students would probably describe them as teachers who genuinely care about their students and are ready to do what is right for the students at a great personal cost. That is what makes them different from all the other teachers. One more significant point of characterising the good teachers is their common role as saviours. Very often teachers are presented as saviours of the students and the movies put them in a position in which they have to save children from drugs, violence, their families or even themselves (Ayers 1993, as quoted by Dalton 2004: 23). This approach does not give a very realistic picture of teachers, since the job of a teacher is not only saving the troubled students, and sometimes helping the students is not as simple as the school movies make it seem. However, Dalton (2004: 25) also highlights the fact that although the good teachers are usually not presented as obeying the institutionalized curriculum, they are not able to escape the dominant system.

According to Dalton (2004: 43-59), the frameworks of the good teachers can be specified by focusing on three characteristics of the *Hollywood curriculum: the aesthetic classroom, the ethical relationship* between the teacher and the student and *the political language*. *The aesthetic classroom* means the surroundings in which the teaching takes place. An essential thing that a teacher can do in the classroom is to give the students several different tools to interpret their lives and the outside world. It can be said that this means challenging the institutional hierarchy, which is dictating the unequal educational practise. For instance, Dalton gives examples of movies in which the teacher takes his students outside to learn the names of the flowers or to the river to

teach them how to swim. *The ethical relationship* between the teacher and the student in turn is strongly emphasized and the ethically valued curriculum functions as “an encounter between human beings” at school. This means that the relationship itself is the curriculum. When talking about female teachers, it is said that “nurture is necessity, but it is not sufficient” (Casey 1993, as quoted by Dalton 2004: 47). The most important thing is that the teacher has authority, which can be accomplished only through the students, and this is where the relationship between the teacher and the students plays an essential role. The third factor, *political language*, the language of the curriculum theory, consists of both ethical and political components. The political project of teachers varies in different films, but it is typically one of the factors that motivate the teacher to teach. It can be for instance helping one certain student or helping the students to face the challenges of ethnicity and social class. All in all, according to Dalton (2004: 42-60), this Hollywood construction of teacher and the aesthetic-ethical-political language spoken by this teacher is virtually the only model of good teacher and good teaching present in popular culture at the moment.

In contrast to the good teacher, Dalton (2004: 61-81) presents also some qualities of a bad teacher. According to Dalton (2004: 61-81), Huebner (1975) has defined five different frameworks for curricular thought: technical, political, scientific, aesthetic and ethical but highlights that none of these frameworks is inherently “good” or “bad” and all of them include both positive and negative aspects. However, Dalton states that almost all of the “bad teachers” in the movies represent the technical and the scientific frameworks. The main goals of the “bad teachers” are efficiency and quality control. Finally, Dalton states that the crucial difference between the good and bad teachers is that the “good” ones are committed to their students in the school settings, whereas the “bad” ones have different goals and they are not as student-oriented. The “bad” ones are motivated by good test results or big payments, which does not lead to good results with the students.

## **2.5 Sexism in school films**

Since I study especially female teachers, gender is an issue that has an effect on many of the teachers’ characteristics. The concept of equality is an essential point when analysing female teachers and some researchers have studied films and categorised them as sexist or non-sexist ones. Artel and Wengraf (1990: 9-12) highlight that non-sexist films are good role models and examples for young children and positive role models encourage the awareness of non-sexist gender roles. In categorising different films as sexist or non-sexist they used several different criteria, for instance

whether boys and girls and men and women are presented with or without stereotyped behaviour and attitudes and whether for instance women's achievements and contributions are shown in the films. These are interesting questions which express attitudes and opinions towards women. Carter and Steiner (2004: 2) mention that it was not until the 1960s, after the "second wave" of the feminist movement, that the systematic research of women and their images in the media began to flourish. The biggest concern at that time was that the sexist messages of different media forms would socialize people, especially children, into thinking that hierarchical stereotypes of sex-roles were natural and normal. In comparison, Gauntlett (2002: 75) makes an interesting comparison between how women and men are presented in movies today. His main idea is that the attitudes towards women as nurturing mother figures have changed over decades and that equality between women and men has somewhat improved. Both the woman and the man in the leading role usually have to be attractive or handsome. On the other hand, for men it is more acceptable to be older, since there are many more leading men that are for instance over forty-fifty years old than leading women of the same age.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 The research question**

According to my own experiences and general knowledge, there are several different stereotypes and typical characteristics associated with women. Moreover, these characteristics can be used also in school movies when describing female teachers. Thus, the main question in the present study is how female teachers are presented in school movies, and whether there are some characteristics and stereotypes associated with them. I will pay attention for instance to the relationship that the female teachers have to their students and colleagues, the teachers' role in the classroom, the concept of good teacher and whether the teachers' personal lives are described in the movies. I will also examine whether the presentation of female teachers in school movies has changed over time, and which characteristics of female teachers are shared by two school movies which have been released in different decades. If there are some differences in how the female teachers are described in these movies, I will also pay attention to these points. What is more, since the movies are from different decades but both present female teachers and may contain common stereotypes, I expect to find both similarities and differences in these films.

### 3.2 Data collection

The data used in the present study consists of two movies, *Up the Down Staircase* (1967, Director Mulligan) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995, Director Smith). The reason why I chose these two movies is that I wanted to focus on only two movies and pay attention to several different features and characteristics. Moreover, both of the movies present female English teachers, which makes it possible to compare the movies in detail, and pay attention, for instance, to the teaching methods of the teachers, since both characters are teaching the same subject. Examining more movies would have been too demanding at this point, and it would have been possible to focus on fewer characteristics. With two movies it is possible to examine them in greater detail and find as many similarities and differences as possible.

Moreover, the two movies have been released in different decades: *Up the Down Staircase* in the late 1960s and *Dangerous Minds* during the middle 1990s. This may affect the style of the movies and the ways in which they describe and present the female teachers. The time aspect is thus one important part of the study.

### 3.3 Methods of analysis

Since the data consists of two movies, the interpretations that I make of the movies are my own observations and opinions, and therefore the analysis of the data is qualitative. I will watch the movies and write down notes about the contents. When analysing my notes, I will concentrate on certain features presented in the movies:

1. the teacher's relationship to her students
2. the teacher's relationship to her colleagues
3. the social lives of the female teachers outside school
4. the teacher's role in the classroom and as a parental model
5. the comparison between the movies published in different decades

Moreover, the features of good and bad teachers appearing in the films are present throughout the analysis. After the points mentioned above have been analysed, there will be a comprehensive picture of how these films present the female teachers and what types of features are associated with them. When analysing these points, the present study will concentrate on comparing the two films.

In addition, the present study will process these points by focusing on both similarities and differences between the films.

## **4 FEMALE TEACHERS IN MOVIES**

In this section I will analyse the features and essential themes found in the two movies, *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995). I will concentrate on the teacher's relationship with her students and colleagues, the social life of the female teacher outside the school and the teacher's roles in the classroom. Finally I will make a short summary of the comparison between the two films.

### **4.1 The teacher's relationship to her students**

As Dalton (2004: 2) states, the knowledge that people have about the relationship between the teacher and a student is moulded by popular culture, and especially school films. The school films may emphasize this relationship and it is also possible that they do not give a realistic picture about it. Nevertheless, the teacher's relationship with her students plays a very important role in teaching. If the teacher is easy-going and close to her students, it is probable that the teaching situations are pleasant for both the teacher and the students.

The movie *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) describes and presents the teacher's relationship to her students. The main character, Miss Barrett is a young English teacher, who has just started her career after graduating from university. The school she works in is a typical American sub-urban school, and the students come from different backgrounds both ethnically and economically. At first Miss Barrett is full of enthusiasm and new ideas, but soon she finds out that not all of the students are nice and willing to learn but have several different problems both at school and outside the classroom. She faces the challenges of multiethnic class, and especially the boys in the class decide not to let her teach without interruptions and teasing. Miss Barrett is timid and shy, and she has no authority. During her first class the students ask her several questions and perhaps the most important one is described in the following example:

Example 1

A boy asks Miss Barrett: "Are you a substitute or a regular?"

The students clearly want to find out how long this new, shy teacher will be teaching them and how they should react to her actions. Nevertheless, Miss Barrett decides to try her best and win the class on her side. However, gradually she becomes more assertive and begins to understand the demands of being a teacher. Miss Barrett decides that she will teach the class even though it is not easy and demands a great amount of work. Gradually she becomes more relaxed around her students and gets also their attention easier than earlier. The most important thing is that she genuinely cares about her students and wants to help them learn. A good example of this is her attempt to help a shy, suicidal Alice, who is not the only one to whom she pays personal attention. Thus, Miss Barrett can be characterised as a good teacher, since according to Dalton (2006: 16-41), a good teacher pays attention to her students and their possible problems on a personal level.

The other movie *Dangerous Minds* (1995) shares several similarities with *Up the Down Staircase*. It also presents an inexperienced teacher, Miss Johnson, who is unaware of the challenges of teaching when she accepts the job as a teacher in a sub-urban high school. The class she teaches consists of students with difficult backgrounds and different ethnicities. The class has had several teachers, but none of them has taught them for long. The following example tells about the students' attitude towards their new teacher:

Example 2

Miss Johnson asks a girl in the class about their previous teacher.

Miss Johnson: "What happened to Miss Shepherd?"

The girl: "Yo, yo, yo, listen up! White bread wants to know what happened to Miss Shepherd!"

A boy from the back of the class answers: "We killed the bitch!"

The example shows how these students are not only noisy and difficult, but also mean and ruthless. If they do not like someone, they truly know how to show it. As a consequence, Miss Johnson finds out very soon that she cannot use any traditional teaching methods, but she has to get the attention of the class somehow and achieve some authority. After a difficult start she tries to think of different ways of teaching, and she pays attention also to the interests of her students. Moreover, she gives the troubled students a chance, as the following example shows.

Example 3

Miss Johnson has taught the students karate in the first lesson, and continues talking.

Miss Johnson: "In fact, from this moment, each one of you is like an inductee... with a clean record. So, if you wanna pass, all you have to do is try. Because at this point, everyone has an A. But it's up to you to keep it."

This is an effective way of gradually winning the students' trust and interest. Like Miss Barrett in *Up the Down Staircase*, also Miss Johnson gets personally and emotionally involved with her students. She truly tries to get to know them and their personalities, and for instance visits their





Example 8    Principal: “Now, I know the newer the teacher, the smarter she is, but I’m afraid you’re just going to have to go along with our policies, even if you don’t agree with them. All right?”  
 Miss Johnson: “Mm-hmm.”

After teaching for a while Miss Johnson gets also emotionally involved with her students and their troublesome lives. She does not care about the rules and regulations but tries to teach the challenging students and keep them motivated to study. Example 9 shows Miss Johnson’s changed attitude towards the school and its policies. She is no longer afraid of the principal although he has found out that Miss Johnson took her students to an amusement park as a reward for reading poems in class. The following example displays the discussion between the principal and Miss Johnson.

Example 9    Principal: “Miss Johnson. The School Board would have every right to insist on your dismissal. You informed no one. You got no permission slips.”  
 Miss Johnson: “Oh but there was no one to inform. All the kids just decided to go to the amusement park at the last minute. And then they let me come along.”  
 Principal: “Did they pay for you?”  
 Miss Johnson: “No, I paid for them. I was just so moved by the invitation.”  
 Principal: “This wasn’t, by any chance, their reward for reading poetry, was it, Miss Johnson?”  
 Miss Johnson: “In my class, Mr. Grandey, poetry is its own reward.”

Miss Johnson’s attitude is somewhat arrogant and she does not respect the principal. Instead of answering the principal’s questions politely she uses irony and at the same time even ridicules him. Moreover, like Miss Barrett, Miss Johnson has one friend, Mister Griffith, among her colleagues, and she is not particularly concerned about making friends in the teachers’ lounge.

### 4.3 The social lives of the female teachers outside the classroom

Both *Up the Down Staircase* and *Dangerous Minds* present the female teachers as assertive and extremely devoted to teaching. The characters could be described even as perfectionists about their work. Consequently, it is not surprising that their social lives are limited to the school and their personal lives are not shown in the films.

In *Up the Down Staircase* Miss Barrett comes to school every morning by bus, and leaves after school by bus. It seems that she has no personal life; instead, she lives for teaching. Her social life is not described at all, and the viewer of the film cannot get any information for instance about her family or friends. *Dangerous Minds* shares a similar description of the main female character and her personal life. Miss Johnson is very passionate about her work, and tries in every way to get her students to learn and become inspired about the literature she teaches. Moreover, the only thing the movie conveys about her personal life outside the school is that she prepares her classes and worries about her students. For instance, she visits her students’ homes and meets their

parents outside the school, in order to get to know the backgrounds of her students. The only scene in which she is not somehow connected to the school or her students is the one in which she is in a pub with one of her colleagues, Hal Griffith. However, they mostly talk about the school and Miss Johnson's class. Griffith gives her advice concerning her teaching and tries to help her with her students. However, the scene also reveals the viewer that Miss Johnson has been married but is divorced. The following example describes the dialogue between Miss Johnson and Mister Griffith.

Example 10 Miss Johnson: "You know, I thought you guys always stuck together. What are you sitting here with me for?"  
 Mister Griffith: "You know, he [Miss Johnson's husband] was my best friend, Louanne. 'Was' is the operative word. He isn't worth your spit."

The example describes the friendship between Miss Johnson and Mister Griffith. They are not only colleagues, but also friends outside the school. They have been friends for a long time and can talk also about difficult matters, such as Miss Johnson's divorce. It is easy for the viewer to notice that this friendship is very important to Miss Johnson, since she has no time to spend with other friends. Most importantly, Mister Griffith understands teacher's work and they can talk about school and Miss Johnson's students, which seems to be almost therapeutic for her.

Moreover, the narrow description of a teacher's personal life is a typical feature of a good teacher. As Dalton (2004: 16-41) states, a good teacher is dedicated to her job and wants to teach in order to improve the lives of the students. The characters in both films seem to act as "saviours", who can do miracles and change their students' lives (Trier 2001: 133).

#### **4.4 The teacher's role in the classroom and as a parental model**

The teacher's role in the classroom is usually very distinctive, and she can be seen as a parental model because of the possible nurturing characteristics (Bauer 1998: 300-317). However, it is possible that the teacher's role varies greatly in school movies. In some films the teacher is described as a scary leader of the class, whereas in others the teacher is down-to-earth and easygoing, usually also liked by the students.

Again, the two films share similar characteristics about the teachers' roles in the classroom. Both female teachers are very shy and unsure about themselves. In *Up the Down Staircase*, the students really test Miss Johnson and find out that she can be tricked, for instance to end the class earlier, as the following example shows:

Example 11 A boy called Lou: “Miss Barrett, Miss Barrett, you forgot to appoint an early dismissal monitor.”

Miss Barrett: “All right, all right. I appoint you early dismissal monitor.”

Lou: “Class dismissed!”

Everybody runs out shouting and laughing.

Miss Barrett: “Class, we have to finish!”

The example shows that Miss Barrett has not yet achieved her role as an authority in the classroom, but the students can easily fool her. Moreover, both Miss Barrett and Miss Johnson seem to be disappointed with the reality of the classroom and the students, since teaching the troubled students is not easy or rewarding at first. However, they soon realize that they have to change their teaching and become braver and more assertive. This leads to better results with the students, and the students start to trust their teachers. Moreover, an essential factor in both movies is the teacher’s attitude towards their students. Particularly in *Dangerous Minds* the students’ attitudes change, when they realize that Miss Johnson genuinely cares about them and wants them to learn. The following example describes this type of situation between Miss Johnson and one of her students.

Example 12 Miss Johnson: “There are no victims in this classroom!”

A girl student: “Why do you care anyway? You’re here just for the money.”

Miss Johnson: “Because I make a choice to care. And, honey, the money ain’t that good.”

The girl: “Whatever.”

Even though getting the students’ trust means teaching with unusual methods and forgetting almost all pedagogical principles, especially with Miss Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, it really seems to be worthwhile. On the other hand, Miss Barrett in *Up the Down Staircase* does not reach the same level with her students as Miss Johnson does in *Dangerous Minds*. Although Miss Barrett tries her best, she cannot use very radical teaching methods or ways to get the attention and respect of the class. In my opinion this is because of the two movies have been published in different decades and school and teaching have changed partially in 30 years. Since also the society and the role of woman have changed in the course of time, it is more acceptable for a female teacher to teach for instance karate, as Miss Johnson does in the film, in a school which is situated in the 1990s, than in a school portrayed in the 1960s.

Teachers in movies can also be seen as parental models (Bauer 1998: 300-317).

However, in these two films the role of the teachers as parental models is not as clear as it could be. In *Up the Down Staircase* Miss Barrett is perhaps too young to be taken seriously as a parental model, since she is only some years older than her oldest students. On the other hand, she can be seen as a role model for some of the girls in the class, for instance the suicidal Alice, who asks for her advice since she has a crush on Miss Barrett’s colleague, English teacher Paul Barringer. The

following example describes Alice's need to communicate with someone who might understand her, in this case Miss Barrett.

Example 13 Alice: "There are some things when you just have to talk to an older woman. Not a mother or an aunt. Even if it hasn't anything to do with English."  
 Mister Barringer comes and interrupts the conversation between Alice and Miss Barrett.  
 Mister Barringer: "Good evening, Alice."  
 Alice: "Excuse me, Miss Barrett."

In addition, although Miss Johnson in *Dangerous Minds* can be seen as a caring teacher, she is more of a caring friend than a parental model. She is interested in her students' lives outside the school, but she cannot be described as a mother figure, which also applies for Miss Barrett in *Up the Down Staircase*.

#### 4.5 Comparison between *Up the Down Staircase* and *Dangerous Minds*

Both school movies present a similar type of female teacher. In *Up the Down Staircase* Miss Barrett is young and inexperienced, like Miss Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*. Since the characters are very similar, the movies are alike as well. Both teachers are uncertain at first, but soon find ways to motivate their students and methods to get their attention. The typical features of a good teacher presented by Dalton (2004: 16-41), the teacher's emotional involvement in students and their personal lives, not following the curriculum and conflicts with administrators, are present in both movies and both Miss Barrett and Miss Johnson can be described with these characteristics. In addition, also the heroic role of the teacher described by Trier (2001: 133) and the rebellious nature of the teacher described by Bauer (1998: 304) can be associated with both of the movies.

Moreover, Trier (2001: 131-139) states that there are two types of school films: those that describe the social life of the teacher and those that do not describe it at all. Both *Up the Down Staircase* and *Dangerous Minds* clearly belong to the category which does not show the social life of the teacher. This gives the viewer of the film a picture of a very hardworking teacher who is devoted to her profession.

Lastly, even though the two movies have been released in different decades, they are surprisingly similar. Certainly the language, for instance, is more vulgar in *Dangerous Minds* and also the methods of Miss Johnson are more modern than the methods of Miss Barrett in *Up the*

*Down Staircase*. However, the features of the two teachers are rather similar and both share a similar attitude towards teaching, the students and the rules and regulations of the schools.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to compare the two school films, *Up the Down Staircase* and *Dangerous Minds*, in order to find out how the female teachers are described in these films, what characteristics are associated with them and whether the two movies have similar characteristics although they are from two different decades.

The results showed that both films describe the female teachers rather similarly. Firstly, the teacher's relationship to her students is rather difficult at first in both movies. Particularly in *Dangerous Minds* the teacher has to use unusual methods in order to get the students' attention and to keep them concentrated on the subject that she is teaching. However, after a difficult start both teachers achieve the trust of their students by being truly interested in their lives, emotionally involved with them and willing to help them to learn. When the students realize that the teachers really care about them, they begin to treat them better and a mutual respect is achieved. Secondly, both movies describe the teacher's relationship to her colleagues as complex and distant, highlighting that the teacher has only one colleague who gives her advice and whom she can rely on. Also the teacher's relationship to the principal is difficult in both movies, since both teachers are rebellious and not willing to follow the curriculum. These characteristics are associated with good teachers, as Dalton (2004: 16-41) states. Thirdly, in both films the teacher's personal life is very scarcely described, as if she did not have a life outside the school. The viewer of the films is given a picture about a hardworking teacher who is deeply devoted to her work. Fourthly, the teacher's role in the classroom is rather similar in both films: the teacher is not respected at first and she has no authority in the classroom. The teacher's role as a parental model is not very clear in either of the movies, and it is not particularly emphasized in these films. In *Up the Down Staircase* this is perhaps because of the character, Miss Barrett, is too young to be considered a mother figure in the classroom. In *Dangerous Minds* the main character, Miss Johnson, can be considered a caring friend rather than a parental model.

According to the results of the study, there were several stereotypical characteristics associated with the female teacher in school movies. For instance the characteristics of a good teacher were emphasized, the social life of the teacher was not described and also the teacher's relationship to other people was rather similar in both films, despite the films are from different decades. Moreover, for instance the heroic features of the teacher were distinctive, and she could be

seen as a saviour. This is presumably related to the common idealistic feature of Hollywood films: there must be a hero in the movie and in school films the hero, and the main character, is often the teacher. Usually there must be also some tension in the relationships between the teacher and her students and the teacher and her colleagues in order for the film to be interesting and credible. The fact that the two movies released in different decades describe the female teachers rather similarly can be based on the role of the teacher in the school and the point that a teacher's job has not changed radically in the course of time in a sense that there still are certain responsibilities and duties which are an essential part of a teacher's work. Even nowadays a teacher's profession includes balancing between his or her own personal views of teaching, the needs of the students, the restrictions of the curriculum and the economic constraints of the school.

The present study has some limitations. The study concentrated only on two school movies, which means that the results may not be comprehensive enough to be generalized. Consequently, there may be school films in which female teachers are described differently and utterly dissimilar characteristics are related to them. Moreover, it is possible that the characteristics described in the two films and associated with female teachers can be associated with teachers in movies in general. Accordingly, the characteristics listed after comparing *Up the Down Staircase* and *Dangerous Minds* are not necessarily specifically the features of a female teacher, but they can be associated with male teachers as well. In addition, it would have been possible to compare female and male teachers and the characteristics associated with them, but I believe that the features associated with female teachers would still have been very distinctive, as they are often emphasized and exaggerated. Since I concentrated only on female teachers, I was able to study certain features and I was also able to compare the two films in a more detailed way. Moreover, in my opinion the amount of data was adequate for this study and provided me with sufficient information. With a broader data it could have been challenging to concentrate on essential features presented by the films. All in all, I am rather satisfied with my analysis despite its limitations, since I was able to compare the two films and pay attention to the features that I consider being the most relevant ones in analysing school films and female teachers.

The present study provides several questions for further studies about female teachers in movies. For instance sexism in school films can be studied in order to find out whether the description of female teachers consists of some distinctively stereotypical or sexist features. In addition, also the language used by the character can be studied with the help of the principles of discourse studies. This provides a possibility to examine how the female teacher's position among her students and colleagues is described, and whether it has features which are typical for women in their speech.

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