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Reframing the Subject: Postwar Instructional Film and Class-Conscious Literacies

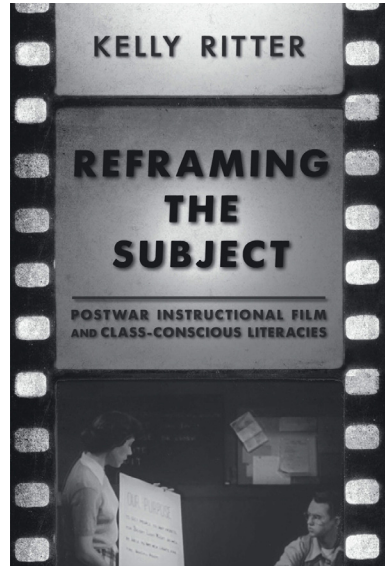
Kelly Ritter

Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. 368 pp.

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In *Reframing the Subject*, Kelly Ritter offers a rigorous and incisive account of the use of instructional films, a subset of “mental hygiene” films, in literacy education following World War II. This book will appeal to an array of scholars and teachers, including those interested in histories of literacy education, the role of social class in US education, and the use of technology in writing instruction. In an era of rapid material and economic growth, instructional films capitalized on an emerging medium to train students in foundational principles of speaking and writing, social conduct, and democratic citizenship. Ritter argues that the narratives and lessons presented in these films nurtured the myth of literacy as a path to social mobility, while simultaneously instructing students to retain the attitudes and behaviors of their socioeconomic classes. The book includes chapters on cultural and curricular developments that set the foundation for instructional film’s use in secondary and postsecondary schools, analyses of the pedagogical and class-based values implicit in specific films, and connections between the instructional film’s legacy and current iterations of online literacy instruction in higher education. While these films may be dismissed as remnants of a bygone era, Ritter makes a compelling case that the attitudes that established their appeal remain an intrinsic part of our pedagogies today. In that sense, the book issues a timely call for educators to reconsider the connections between our methods of classroom instruction and the material realities of students’ lives.

Ritter observes that the promise of higher education, as a pathway to the comfort and security of a middle-class lifestyle, emerged at the end of World War II. At this time, economic and material advances, along with government measures like the GI Bill, made it possible for increasing numbers of Americans to attend college. In the decades that followed, Ritter argues, the myth of social uplift through education was inculcated through literacy instruction at the secondary and postsecondary levels, with harmful consequences for students. One prominent vehicle of this myth was the instructional film, which offered streamlined instruction in literacy-based



values and practices that students would need for academic and professional success. At the same time, the films employed visual, verbal, and narrative cues to situate this instruction in the wider context of lessons in social etiquette, morality, and other behaviors representative of an idealized middle class. Consequently, only those students who had acquired prior knowledge of these behaviors, usually in their home communities, benefitted from such lessons. Students who lacked such knowledge were unable to identify with the characters and scenarios presented on screen, reinforcing their status as outsiders to middle-class culture and discouraging their economic mobility. “The films are thus a paradox,” writes Ritter, “wherein lessons are presented as universal ‘truths’ but only to those who already know and believe those truths as part of their existing socioeconomic identities” (33). Through this paradox, the postwar instructional film upheld—superficially—the ideal of education as a leveler of class distinctions, while still emphasizing socio-economic hierarchy as a precondition of literacy.

Reframing does not concern the postwar era only, however, but the present moment in higher education, when colleges and universities are turning to digital technologies to address problems of increasing enrollments, larger class sizes, and other obstacles to access. Ritter argues that the mythological ideal of a one-size-fits-all education that was used to justify the use of instructional films in the 1940s and 50s persists today in the embrace of mass-delivered online literacy instruction, in particular with MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). In her analysis, online versions of literacy instruction replicate the postwar instructional film’s promise of efficiency and aspiration to erase socioeconomic differences by providing prepackaged, identical instruction to all students, regardless of class or knowledge-based diversity. In doing so these mass-delivered systems, like the instructional film before them, sidestep the agency of teachers to inculcate students in class-based literacies that impede social and economic mobility.

Ritter’s first chapter provides the theoretical ground for her argument by surveying a number of scholarly and popular voices, from the postwar era to the present, who demonstrate the prominent role that class-based values have historically played in shaping public education. Stanley Aronowitz, for example, argues that schooling has little impact on students’ socioeconomic mobility. Rather, it is the extra-institutional and class-based social networks to which students belong that determine their opportunities for academic and professional achievement. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the role of schools is then to conceal the arbitrary nature of social demarcations under the veil of academic rankings and classifications. Ritter shows how the work of these and other writers who implicate the public schooling system in ideologies of class is supported by ethnographic research illustrating the ways that social stratification plays out in classroom settings. Studies by Jean Anyon, Michael Apple, Harvey Graff, and Shirley Bryce Heath prompt Ritter to ask why, given the abundance of social and economic forces that conspire against upward mobility, the promise of education as a means of transcending one’s birth-class continues to hold sway.

In Chapter 2, Ritter proposes that postwar Americans’ commitment to the idea of education as a leveling force was motivated not only by the ambition of citizens

to succeed in the free market but a civic-minded belief that individual liberation through literacy acquisition would contribute to the country's overall freedom. Ritter shows how this vision, which owed much to the work of John Dewey, was developed by subsequent education theorists in directions that compromised its more progressive aspects. The work of James Bryan Conant in particular upheld Dewey's belief that all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, should have access to quality education. At the same time, he stressed that students' chances of academic success would largely be determined by the social class of their birth. On this view, the path to a "free society" laid in an "informed recognition" of class divisions that made the most of each strata of students' class-based literacies (65). According to Ritter, this modification for a postwar audience of Dewey's notion of education-as-democracy set the philosophical foundation for the postwar instructional film, which was designed to train students to maintain the literacy-based practices of their class rather than provide the tools needed to rise above that class.

In response to curricular proposals like Conant's, educators looked to the instructional film as a method for educating all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or background—without threatening the class structure on which national well-being was felt to depend. It was no accident that these films should appear to educators as the "magic" answer to new demands placed on secondary schools in the postwar era. As Chapter 3 argues, the instructional film industry relied on wide-scale case studies of youth responses to cinema and prevailing pedagogical values to create products that would capture the attention of students while simultaneously strengthening their dependence on class-based literacies. Ritter focuses on the Macmillan Company's twelve volume Payne Fund Studies, which were conducted from 1928–1932 to determine the influence of motion pictures on children's attitudes and behaviors, especially in relation to morality and ethics. Although these studies were motivated by concerns regarding popular cinema's potentially corrupting influence on young viewers, researchers could find no measurable effects of watching films on the attitudes or behaviors of children. According to Ritter, these findings would have supported—paradoxically—the work of the instructional film industry, which deliberately constructed its products *not* to change behavior "but reinforce it, along class lines" (125). She concludes that instructional films were not used to instill new knowledge or behavior in students but to enhance their interest in classroom lessons, which encouraged them to exercise civic responsibility by using the literacies that they already possessed by virtue of their class standing.

Chapters 4 and 5 continue Ritter's account of the instructional film as a mechanism for class maintenance through close readings of films produced by postwar industry leader Coronet Films. The films Ritter analyzes fall into two categories: mental hygiene films that model middle-class attitudes and behaviors and practice-based films that train students in middle-class principles of writing and speaking. Films in the first category depict middle- or upper-class teenagers who learn the social, economic, and/or moral value of attitudes and behaviors appropriate to their social station. The characters who succeed in these lessons are motivated by a desire to maintain their class standing, a concern that is never explicitly discussed

but treated as knowledge that viewers share with the persons on-screen. In this way, the films do not provide instruction in the social literacies they depict so much as lessons in who can—and, by implication, who can't—acquire them. More practice-based films by Coronet sought to make the increasingly diverse postwar classroom more manageable terrain for teachers by bringing students' attitudes and behavior into line with middle-class ideals. To that end, the films upheld principles of "good" speaking and writing contemporaneous to their creation, such as accurate retention and clear reporting of information, which encouraged strict adherence to received knowledge. In this way Coronet films did not teach *writing*, which Ritter associates with the creation of new knowledge through invention, but served to reinforce students' commitments to the values and beliefs of their respective social classes.

The final chapter shifts our focus to the present, when colleges and universities are turning to various modes of online instruction to address problems of access to higher education. Her critique focuses primarily on MOOC writing courses, which she regards as inheritors of the instructional film's tendencies to reduce literacy to a set of rote skills and neglect the positionality of users (246). Invoking the work of James Porter, Ritter views MOOCs as "mass instructional products" that replace meaningful teacher-student dialogue with one-way regurgitation of tasks modeled on-screen. In this way, they resemble "a commodity, an object to be bought and sold as if it were a textbook" more than a college course (Porter qtd. in Ritter 261). One consequence of this shift from course to product is a diminishing of the teacher's role: Ritter observes parallels between Denise Comer's remarks on her "elevated and deauthorize[d]" role as instructor in Duke University's MOOC on first-year writing and the way that instructional films demoted teachers from generating course content to mediating prepackaged products (Comer qtd. in Ritter 271). At times, Ritter seems to extend her critique of mass-delivered online instruction to other forms of distance learning, as in her statement that writing is not a "subject to be taught remotely, due to its ideological freight and its basis in individuated instruction" (246). Here, readers invested in online writing instruction may have expected Ritter to address recommendations by scholars in this area for developing online writing courses that are responsive to the needs of nontraditional students. Considered as a whole, however, *Reframing the Subject* should cause us to reevaluate arguments for mass-delivered writing instruction as the answer to problems of educational access in light of past arguments made for technological alternatives to traditional classroom instruction.