



Project
MUSE[®]

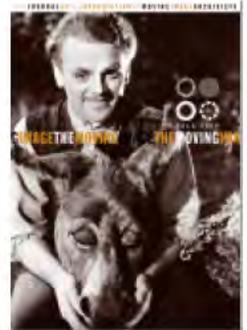
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

The Joy of Sex Education

Leo Enticknap

The Moving Image, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 159-161 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press



▶ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mov/summary/v010/10.1.enticknap.html>

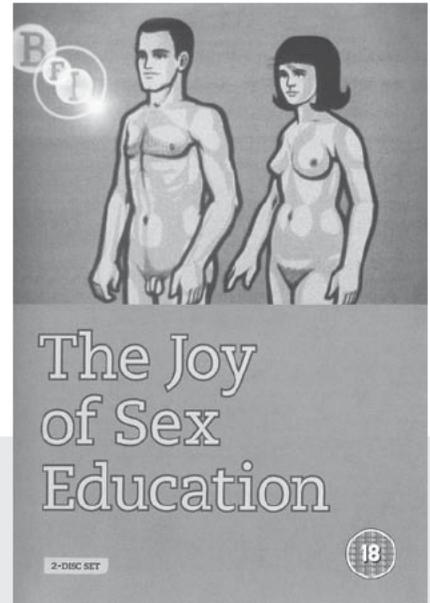
the director keeps disappearing, replaced by another and another, and so on. It's all a bit too much: the viewer is exhausted by film's end after watching sixty-five minutes of this barrage of bizarre images.

That said, the film's formal properties accentuate its message about the sorry state of Soviet society. Criticism of bureaucrats was certainly allowable, but Mikaberidze got carried away with his enthusiasm. Where are the positive role models? There is only one worker—strong, sweaty, tall—to serve as counterpoint to the bureaucrats and their hangers-on. Piles of crumpled paper, mounds of cigarette butts, and crumbs of discarded food litter the floor. People spit on the floor as well (there was a campaign against public spitting). Executives play with paper airplanes as the line of petitioners increases. Crude signs are everywhere: “Don't Interrupt. Busy man at work”; “When your business is finished, leave.” The bureaucrat's apartment is filled with bourgeois knickknacks. His wife, with her long, manicured fingernails and perky, short plaid skirt, is the picture of bourgeois womanhood, with her obsession for material goods and the perks of her husband's former position (“No car! No free tickets!” she shrieks disconsolately). The image of Soviet life is a grim one—and all too true.

What Mikaberidze forgot or ignored was that film during the Cultural Revolution not only needed to be critical but also needed to point to positive outcomes. True, the business manager loses his job, and his “grandmother” betrays him, but there are no healthy role models or images of what the new, truly revolutionary way of life would look like. Apart from the worker, a somewhat frightening character with his stern gaze, there is also a menacing shot of a Young Communist (Komsomol) member launching a gigantic fountain pen as a deadly weapon. Not only was the film formalist and inaccessible to the masses but it was also too negative to be acceptable regardless. *My Grandmother* well illustrates the difficult balancing act for directors at this perilous time.

Beth Custer's music, played by a small band, is delightful and perfectly suited to the action of the film. Nils Frykdahl's narration of the intertitles is amusingly ironic. The occasional addition of a “Georgian voice” (Edisher

Dabrundashvili) to the sound tracks adds to the overall strangeness of the film. The DVD would have benefited from more extensive notes or an extra feature that placed the film within a critical and historical context for uninitiated viewers.



The Joy of Sex Education
BFI, 2009

Leo Enticknap

“I suggest that in your next film, you show yourself being buggered by a long-haired hippy. That will make them sit up.” Such was the reaction of one correspondent to Martin Cole, a hitherto unknown biology lecturer at an obscure British university, elicited by the storm of controversy generated by the release of *Growing Up* in 1971. The explicitness with which Cole's 16mm classroom film portrayed the facts of life has, it seems, actually gained some power to shock since: its inclusion in the BFI's DVD compilation *The Joy of Sex Education* is, according to an explanatory note on the sleeve, the sole reason for the entire set carrying an 18-certificate. Ironically, therefore, most of the age group for whom the film was originally intended cannot now, thirty-eight years later, legally buy a copy.

This sort of temporal anomaly characterizes the entire selection of sex “education” (the noun implies the ideologically neutral communication of knowledge and ideas, something that certainly does not happen in many of the films presented here) films, all but one British, produced between 1917 and 1973. The genre seems to have oscillated between conservative and liberal in approach. At one end of the story, we have *Whatsoever a Man Soweth* (1917), aptly characterized by Bryony Dixon’s sleeve essay as a “straight sermon” on the consequences of venereal disease (the protagonist of which is aptly named Dick). At the other, *Ave You Got a Male Assistant Please Miss?* (1973) closes with a similarly stark warning about the consequences of unwanted pregnancy. In between, less judgmental approaches can be found in *How to Tell* (1931), which urges parents to educate their children on the facts of life, and in *Learning to Live* (1964), which, while still condemning extramarital sex, does not portray sex itself as exclusively negative—hardly (no pun intended—honest!) surprising given that the film was sponsored by a condom manufacturer.

The films fall conveniently into three broad categories: morality tales about venereal disease, morality tales about unwanted pregnancy, and films explaining the biological nuts (oh, drat, another pun) and bolts, with varying degrees of moralistic spin attached thereto. A distinct pattern emerges in the conservative–liberal split: the “prophecy of doom” subgenre is most noticeable at times of conflict and political instability, whereas the films that do not start from the default position that sex per se should be considered undesirable tended to be made at times of comparative prosperity and in the absence of international conflict. Examples from both worlds were advising service personnel stationed abroad to refrain from knocking in the natives feature prominently, notably *Whatsoever a Man Soweth*, *Love on Leave* (1940), and the gloriously politically incorrect Halas and Bachelor animation *Six Little Jungle Boys* (1945), which would make *Coal Black and De Sebben Dwarfs* look like a training film for equality and diversity officers. The less judgmental strand is represented primarily by *How to Tell* (released significantly before

the effects of the Great Depression were felt among the wider British population), which argues that full-scale sex education, delivered by parents to their children, is essential for them to develop into mature adults capable of sustaining their own marital relationships, and by what possibly remains the most infamous and most controversial classroom film ever made in Britain, *Growing Up*. Its infamy derives from the inclusion of actual, unstimulated intercourse and masturbation scenes in lieu of visual euphemisms involving farm animals à la *The Mystery of Marriage* (1932) or the animated diagrams used to convey the bulk of the factual information in *Growing Girls* (1949). Though the film’s underlying moral message—that sex should ideally take place within a monogamous and committed relationship—is essentially similar to that of its predecessors (it also includes a warning of the consequences of unplanned pregnancy), the explicit scenes unleashed a wave of protest. *Growing Up* generated extensive media coverage: one city council banned the film from use in its schools citing the Obscene Publications Act, its female “star” was sacked from her job as a teacher, and Cole received hate mail from the public, a selection of which is reproduced in the booklet accompanying the DVDs (e.g., “I hope someone castrates you, you perverted bastard”).

An intriguing curiosity is found in the only non-British contribution to the collection. *Her Name Was Ellie, His Name Was Lyle* (1967) was licensed for distribution by the Concord Film Council, originally a religious charity that, by the late 1960s, specialized in releasing foreign-made educational, political, and sponsored films on 16mm to U.K. schools and community groups. Though a relatively conventional cautionary tale about the spread of syphilis, the film is notable for its gritty, monochrome mise-en-scène; New York locations; and the future careers of the two teenage protagonists, whose “hit-and-run contact” is the origin of a syphilis epidemic: John Pleshette, who later became a mainstream Hollywood director, and Amy Taubin, the critic, feminist, and avant-garde filmmaker who, according to Jez Stewart’s accompanying essay, has regretted her role in the film ever since.

The selection and curation of these films embodies the strengths and weaknesses of the BFI's prolific video publishing program in recent years. Following the precedent set by their British Transport Films and Documentary Movement DVDs, this set marks a welcome attempt to represent the broader range of the National Film and Television Archive's holdings in its publishing activity and not just a restricted range of iconic feature films. The accompanying thirty-seven-page booklet contains four extensive essays introducing the topic of sex education and public health and shorter introductory notes for each film, most of them by members of the BFI's curatorial staff. These pieces offer concise and well-focused introductions to the films themselves, though it would have been interesting to read a little more on the way they were distributed and shown and, in particular, their target audiences. The DVD-and-booklet package is a preferable way of presenting contextualizing material to commentaries and other multimedia extras on the DVD itself as the latter can be read before or after viewing the content and without the need for playback equipment.

The technical presentation of the films themselves is a real mixed bag. Most of the earlier titles appear to have been transferred from preservation elements, but the material from the 1960s and 1970s seems to derive from heavily worn 16mm release prints. Dirt, scratching, jump cuts, and dye fading are noticeable throughout most of the later films. The warts-and-all approach has been taken in previous BFI DVDs, notably the Documentary Movement set, and one could justify it on the curatorial grounds that such presentation is probably an accurate reflection of how most audiences would have experienced these films in a nontheatrical setting. In this case, however, some of the source elements are so worn out as to be seriously distracting, notably *Learning to Live* and *Don't Be Like Brenda* (1973).

The bit rate drops to as low as three to four megabits per second in many of the films, with the result that digital artifacts are clearly visible when the DVDs are viewed on anything larger than a typical computer monitor. And though it makes logical sense to encode mono sound tracks as a Dolby 1.0 audio channel, many 5.1

channel home theater systems are not capable of reproducing the center channel in isolation at a sufficient volume to be comfortably audible, hence the reason the vast majority of commercial DVD publishers duplicate mono tracks as a left and right, 2.0 audio stream. The use of 1.0 audio combined with a relatively low audio signal level on these discs is, in the opinion of this reviewer, a significant defect. Furthermore, that the musical accompaniments for the silent titles are presented as a 2.0 mix necessitates frequent volume adjustments.

Though I suspect that the choice of subject matter for these DVDs was chosen with popular appeal primarily in mind (in the same vein, the choice of *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* for the BFI's inaugural Blu-ray release resulted in one of their highest sales figures for a retail video title—the purchasers possibly having been persuaded to part with their cash by a morbid curiosity as to what that infamous chocolate sponge cake looks like in 1080p high definition), I hope that *The Joy of Sex Education* will provide the springboard for further explorations of educational films in the National Film and Television Archive. Some significant research and curatorship has taken place in relation to these genres in the United States in recent years, from Ken Smith's book,¹ Rick Prelinger's online collection, and critical documentaries such as *Hell's Highway* (2003, directed by Bret Wood). Despite them also having been an integral part of British film history and culture, from Gaumont-British Instructional in the 1930s to Boulton-Hawker in the 1970s, educational films in Britain remain largely forgotten by historians and curators, except to a limited extent within the regional film archive movement. Though *The Joy of Sex Education* does not match the standard of technical presentation of some of the BFI's other recent DVD publications, it represents a significant curatorial achievement, one that I hope will encourage further exploration of and research into educational films in the United Kingdom.

NOTE

1. Ken Smith, *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films, 1947–1970* (Jackson, Tenn.: Blast Books, 1999).