Being Nick Von Sternberg: Critical Parodies of Film Students in Anglophone Cinema

Abstract

This article explores the complex and often contentious representations of film students in anglophone cinema, particularly as portrayed in Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir* (2019) and its sequel *The Souvenir Part II* (2021). By examining the historical context of film education since its inception in the 1930s, it highlights the persistent tensions between academia and the film industry, which have shaped the portrayal of film students on screen. The article argues that while earlier representations often lean towards negative stereotypes—depicting film students as privileged, narcissistic, or detached from reality—more recent films, especially those from the 2010s onward, offer more nuanced portrayals that reflect the diverse, lived experiences of film students. Through a critical analysis of various films, this article illustrates how narratives such as *Dear White People* (2014), *Dolemite Is My Name* (2019), and Hogg's works, provide more authentic insights into the film school experience, emphasizing the importance of personal voice and artistic development over mere vocational training and seeing Film as a 'Mickey Mouse' course. Ultimately, the article contributes to a growing discourse on the representation of students in media, advocating for a more comprehensive understanding of the specific contexts of film education in shaping both individual identities and broader cultural narratives and education and Cinema.

Introduction

In Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir* (2019), a tutor of film student Julie (Honor Swinton Byrne) is talking to her about her project and the importance of being careful when budgeting for productions. He takes a moment before stating that 'I don't suppose you have to think about budget in Knightsbridge, do you?' It is a cutting remark that betrays the tutor's bitterness towards Julie's privilege. It is one of many tensions in the film, between the tutors at the film school Julie attends, modelled on the UK's National Film & Television School where director Joanna Hogg was a student, and the students. There are tensions between the students themselves, some though not all, rooted in class, but the film and its sequel, *The Souvenir: Part II* (Hogg, 2021) provide arguably the most nuanced and complex portraits of film school, film students and film education in anglophone cinema. This article surveys representations of film students - and some film tutors - on screen in, predominantly, anglophone cinema - with mentions of significant non-

anglophone examples - and argues that the portrayals represent a longstanding tension, arguably a hostility, between academia and the film industry dating back to the earliest days of film education in the 1930s and running through subsequent decades. It is from the 2010s onwards that a notable shift in the portrayal of film students and film education occurs, with more nuanced and positive portrayals emerging, though even then the ideas that film education is spurious and film students unbearable aren't completely erased, as this article hopes to show.

Over decades following the emergence of film education, informally and then formally, in the UK and the US in the 1930s, there remained a tension between the film industry and organisations engaged in the appreciation and teaching of film. This article draws together historical accounts of the emergence of film education and film schools in the UK and US to suggest where predominantly negative accounts of film students on screen may have emerged from even as, and maybe in part as a response to, Hollywood filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s contained many successful filmmakers who emerged from American film schools in the 1960s. The 'movie brats' including George Lucas, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola are synonymous with cementing the idea that film schools are optimal training grounds for filmmakers. However, as this article attests, the film industry itself, through its representations of film students, does not hold the view that film schools are a viable or appropriate means to progress into professional filmmaking, if the negative, undermining, and patronising representations of film students are anything to go by. This article begins with a survey of representations of film students from the 1970s to the 2000s in mainstream US and UK cinema, before moving onto a more detailed look at some representations from the 2010s onwards, finally concluding with a short historical survey of film education in the US and the UK that aims to underpin where the representations sprang from or what they may be in dialogue with, culturally.

This article is situated within a growing literature of representations of students in the media and contributes to the discussion from the specific disciplinary context of film education. Much of the emerging literature on representations of students more broadly seeks to critique narrow and often disparaging understanding of student experience and identity. Brooks and O'Shea (2021) write how 'students have often been viewed – by others, if not by themselves – as socialites, 'party animals' or even hedonists, interested primarily in the social opportunities afforded by higher education' (2021: 06). This is often down to the fact that, as Buckingham (2021) points out 'representations of youth […] are rarely produced by young people themselves (2021: 02). Buckingham asserts that discerning representations of youth on screen 'raise questions about

the characteristics and conditions of youth [and] about the place of youth in wider society' (2021: 05). Arguably, most films discussed here have little interest in those kinds of representation, at least until the emergence of films in the 2010s, consistently.

What the films here, mostly, create is the idea of a 'traditional' film student and as Sykes (2021) writes 'portrayals of "traditional" student lives remain consumed by stereotypes which do not match up with their reality' (2021: 91). The films discussed in depth in part two, particular the work of Joanna Hogg and the film *Dolemite Is My Name* (Brewer, 2019), create a more nuanced portrait of film students, showing that, as Calver and Michael-Fox (2021) have argued, in addition to evading the complex lived realities of university students, media representations can also highlight those complexities (2021: 167). Tropes including the idea of a 'traditional' student, or 'normal' one, where the default including across this survey data is 'more often than not white, straight, cis-gendered, able-bodied and unencumbered' (Finn et al., 2021: 199), are damaging, not least because they fail, in more recent iterations where they still show up, to 'acknowledge the rapid and caustic changes that have taken place in HE since the late 1990s and which shape the material conditions of students and graduates (ibid). So many of the portrayals of film students support O'Shea and Brooks's (2021) assertion that university students as complex identities are 'taken for granted' (2021: 247). This article seeks to bring to the fore some reasons why this happens in representations of film students on screen.

Approach to the Study

The film student, as an identity that can be represented in a specific form – albeit a narrow and stereotypical one - doesn't really emerge until the 1960s, at a time where film studies emerges more readily as a singular discipline (Grieveson and Wasson, 2008), the subject becoming disentangled from its early parental ties in English and Fine Arts departments primarily. Around this time, with the development of film schools such as those at UCLA and USC in the US, and the National Film School in the UK, there emerges several filmmakers who had studied film explicitly at university. The most famous of these filmmakers include Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas. These men and some of their peers were dubbed retrospectively the 'Movie Brats' a nomenclature that suggests a derision or dismissal that can be found across many of the representations of film students that emerge in the late 1970s and beyond. The films covered in this article represents a comprehensive account of film student

representation in anglophone cinema at the time of writing, and to the best of the author's knowledge.

The reason to focus on representations of US and UK based film student identity predominately is due to the amount of material available to conduct a reasonable survey, as well as the complicated relationship between academia and higher education, and the mainstream film industries in those contexts, which is discussed later. While there has been a move towards greater representations of female film students from female directors in the twenty-first century, and these are covered in this piece, they represent a slim volume in terms of data. This is representative itself of the still marginalised position of women in creative power roles in the anglophone film industries, as covered extensively for example by the work of the Prof. Shelley Cobb through *Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary Film Culture in the UK* (AHRC, 2017-2020) and *Behind The Camera,* an ongoing research project and inclusion initiative at USC Annenberg, looking at regular intervals at representation of women in Hollywood in production but also, in performance roles. The first section of this chapter is a survey of representations of film students and film education from the late 1970s into the 2000s.

Part One: 1970s to 2000s

Woody Allen did not complete his studies in film at New York University (NYU). In his early works, moving from his all-out comedies to his celebrated comedy-dramas, education itself and the education of his films' protagonists is frequently a subject for dialogue. Allen's response is often derisory about the need for education at all. In both *Manhattan* (1979) and *Stardust Memories* (1980) Allen's on-screen character is asked about his education and gives flippant, comedic answers regarding why he did not complete his studies. He uses the opportunity to show his innate wit, as if that alone was the reason for his success, and he dismisses education as fundamental to a person's development. He is not just derisory about education, but also towards academics. In *Stardust Memories* he proclaims he is not the type of person who is suited to giving lectures and in *Annie Hall* (1977) his character claims that 'everything our parents said is good for us is bad, including college' before the famous scene where Allen embarrasses a garrulous academic regarding his knowledge of Marshall McLuhan by presenting McLuhan himself. Allen is a filmmaker who succeeded despite a lack of formal film training. However, his success is in part due to a deep engagement with film history and an intellectual understanding of wider social, cultural and artistic content and contexts. Allen may not be keen on formal academia, but through

his creative works he has shown that learning from other artworks and knowledge of other cultural and artistic areas are key aspects in his filmmaking.

‘Movie Brat’ Brian De Palma, while grouped in with filmmakers in the 1970s who studied film at American universities, never formally studied cinema, though the American college system, with its ability for students to gain access to and formatively study a variety of disciplines, opened De Palma’s eyes to cinema and provided the basis for his career upon graduation from studying theatre at Sarah Lawrence College. In 1979, De Palma returned to Sarah Lawrence as a teacher and wrote and directed a film about a young man undergoing a strange filmmaking education in *Home Movies.* Ostensibly a teaching project with students as crew, Denis Byrd (Keith Gordon) is a young man spying on his father who he suspects is having an affair. He is caught looking at a woman undressing in a nearby window by a maniacal drama teacher Dr Tuttle (Kirk Douglas) who uses cinema to teach people how to live. The film has smart postmodern elements by utilising film within the film components and being a deft critique of star personas - including the tutor as ‘star’, Douglas’s character goes by “Maestro” - and auto-ethnographic documentary techniques, even if some of the crudeness hasn’t aged well and a scene involving blackface remains particularly grotesque. Aside from drama, film students and film schools on screen are portrayed negatively in several genres, highlighting the disdain among the film industry towards film education that is the thesis of this article.

One of the most extreme representations of a film student is in the adaptation of novelist Bret Easton Ellis’s *The Rules of Attraction* (Avary, 2002) where a young man studying film at NYU misquotes the title of Dziga Vertov’s seminal *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) before videoing the rape of one of the protagonists and calling it his ‘film’. Director Roger Avary studied film at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, so it’s likely that this sour representation is from the source material, authored by Bret Easton Ellis, someone with a known disdain for film critics, the formal film industry, and indeed structural organisations of all kinds. Exceptions to the largely male dominated ‘auteur in training’ portrayals can be found in *Tiny Furniture* (Dunham, 2010) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999). In *Tiny Furniture* Lena Dunham, who also wrote and directed the film, stars as film graduate Aura who returns home to a life of veritable privilege in New York and to work through post-graduation angst. The most poignant moment regarding her schooling in film occurs as she is explaining that she majored in film theory before taking a summer job as a research assistant to a documentary professor. The person she is in conversation with says ‘that sounds like fun’. ‘It wasn’t’, is Aura’s reply, before immediately

inhaling marijuana through a bong. Dunham herself studied Creative Writing at university and found great success with her television show *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) in which she plays a privileged and professional, if naïve, creative writing graduate.

The three film students in *The Blair Witch Project* are portrayed as people who are excited and engaged with their filmic idea and there is a sense of collaboration and shared goals. The female of the trio, Heather (Heather Donahue), is the director and, despite the need for conflict to arise within the group, her narcissistic and overtly megalomaniac tendencies are minimal though the film punishes the young students for their hubris. Heather is portrayed as committed and driven and with the requisite command to keep the work on track, though her drive does push the trio further toward their doom than might be advisable and Heather understands and regrets this in one of the film's most famous scenes, where she confesses, captures her plight and cries on camera in extreme close-up. Up until things start to go sour there's a naiveté and an almost childish joy that captures the thrill of embarking on a first serious project for a group of young aspiring filmmakers.

Horror films and their increasing knowingness from the 1990s onwards seem to offer an appropriate genre to house film student representations and, like those in *Urban Legends: Final Cut* (Ottman, 2000), the crew of film students who start to document the zombie apocalypse in another found footage film *Diary Of The Dead* (Romero, 2007) are a spoiled, narcissistic and vainglorious lot who come to find humility through the atrocities they compulsively capture. Possibly the most famous representation of a film student resides within the character of supreme film 'geek' Randy Meeks (Jamie Kennedy) in the *Scream* horror films. In the first film, *Scream* (Craven, 1996), Randy is a high school student. Subsequently he becomes a college film student in the sequel *Scream 2* (Craven, 1997). In both Scream films Randy's Cinephile knowledge is used to guide the audience and cast in the conventions of the genre and the form. In *Scream 2* this takes place largely in a classroom where students lounge around and discuss sequels in a jovial and superficial way even as their peers are slaughtered around them. In *The Freshman* (Bergman, 1990) the student of the title, Clark (Matthew Broderick), is one of the most moderate filmic representations of a film student. He is both naïve and astute, shy yet with a bold reserve, in other words, a three-dimensional character. The film lecturer on the other hand, is pompous, grandiose, and egotistical. Similar characteristics to Broderick's character could be applied to Kevin Bacon's in *The Big Picture* (Guest, 1989) at least at the start of the film. The film follows Bacon's award-winning film graduate Nick Chapman as he is courted, seduced, and changed by

Hollywood. Along the way he learns hard lessons about the industry and how it 'teaches' film school graduates the harsh truths of the 'real world', providing what film schools are unable to. In this instance it's the film industry warping the corruptible mind of the film student, which is an interesting counter to many of the narratives discussed here, where the students are seen as greedy and vainglorious during their studies. This is the case in two non-US films.

Two students dreaming of Hollywood can be found in a British entry to the slim canon of film students on screen - Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir* films counter this somewhat and are discussed in the next section - in *I Want Candy* (Surjik, 2007). *I Want Candy* is a comedy featuring two aspiring students who set out to make a dramatic opus but end up making an erotic feature with the world's biggest adult film star. They are portrayed as sly, ambitious, selfish, snobby, and naïve and the portrayal of their film tutor is an echo of many of those same traits. An Australian entry to the canon can be found in *Cut* (Randall, 2000), a slasher movie starring Molly Ringwald as an actress returning to the scenes of an unfinished horror movie (directed by a feisty Kylie Minogue who gets murdered in the first scene) with a group of film students out to finish the movie and quell the supposed curse attached to it. It is an interesting addition to this slim sub-genre in that the film lecturer (someone who worked on the original, unfinished slasher flick) is a hero at the end and does his best at the outset to dissuade the students from pursuing the project. But they, as with most film students on screen, know best, and one by one the students of the Film Audio-visual Radio & Television School (yes, F.A.R.T.S., announced in a visual gag worthy of Richard Lester) are picked off. In a lovely ironic moment, the aspiring cinematographer gets it in the eye for staying beyond when is logical, all in pursuit of the perfect shot.

The film student that reflects the current state of film education most cynically, and possibly accurately, can be found in Gregg Araki's apocalyptic teenage mystery *Kaboom* (2010). The lead character of Smith (Thomas Dekker) is confused, smart and snobby. He also provides apposite commentary on contemporary film education when he states studying film is like 'devoting your life to studying an animal that's on the verge of extinction'. In maybe the most cutting commentary on film students, Smith is never seen in a classroom, once. Indeed, not a single scene in this largely campus set film takes place in a classroom. Whether mostly negative, occasionally positive or at least benign, what the films discussed here have in common is a mostly dismissive attitude towards film students which ultimately displays a lack of understanding of film education from the film industry in terms of what students learn on film courses and how they are prepared for professional progression. The current situation regarding film education should not be

presented in terms as dramatic as those espoused by *Kaboom*, and in the 2010s, as discussed next, representations start to become more complex, balanced, and interesting through a series of films that involve film students and film education in meaningful ways in their narratives.

Part Two: 2010s Onwards

Smith's proclamation in *Kaboom* may not have entirely come to pass regarding cinema's extinction but the form has undoubtedly had its dominance as the predominant screen culture eroded over the last few decades. If anything, the industry could have doubled down on its negative perceptions of film students as, from film education's earliest days as will be discussed in the next section, the industry has reacted against the study of film in a variety of ways that suggest a fear of how such an undertaking would impact its bottom line and economic dominance. However, in the 2010s there emerged a series of films with deeper and more nuanced and arguably more positive portrayals of film students, even if the portrayal of film lecturers didn't progress at the same speed. In Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2014), Sam (Tessa Thompson) is studying film at university/college but isn't the stereotypical film geek familiar from previous representations. In a way, she echoes the idea in *Kaboom* that film is not a central subject worthy of study, because cinema occupies a strand of her media identity and ambitions. She has a radio show, is active on social media and she makes films. All are ways for her to engage with identity, politics and activism as well as providing the creative means to do so.

Over the course of the film, Sam progresses her understanding and relationship with film in deep ways. She goes from loudly decrying *Gremlins* as racist, submitting a 'thematically dubious' reimagining of *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 2015) titled *Rebirth of a Nation,* submitting work late and protesting a new Tyler Perry movie, to thoughtfully including horrifying footage she shoots of an on-campus Blackface party in her work in a way that merges social injustice with a personal voice all her own. The film, written and directed by film graduate Simien, has several jokes at the expense of the film students but it never feels cruel or two-dimensional. Instead, Sam's cocksureness is presented as part of the coming of age of a young woman who has not yet, as the film starts, taken the opportunity to use her studies as a way of interrogating who she is and what she really wants to do with her life. It feels like a positive representation of the important role universities can play in developing people and therefore it's no coincidence that the work presented to audiences as made by Sam moves from shallow and provocative to something more nuanced as she moves through her course.

The representation of film students is not as wholly progressive in Todd Solondz's *Wiener-Dog* (2016) but as expected from a Solondz film, possibly, no-one is spared a cruel unpicking from tutors to spoiled graduates turned successful directors. The film is a portmanteau work, tied together by the recurring motif of a sausage dog as it moves between various owners. In the third story of four it turns up under the ownership of Danny DeVito's dilapidated screenwriting teacher Dave Schmerz, whose place at the college he teaches hangs by a thread as the one film he had produced disappears further into the rear-view mirror and his students find his methods unsuited to their needs and demands. He is cornered outside a classroom and pitched an idea that apparently gives a new spin on the superhero genre (spoiler, it doesn't) with the student declaring hubristically 'has a film student ever done that? I don't think so'. In a scene that will resonate with film lecturers who have sat through the application process, a panel of lecturers try to get something resembling a specific answer about cinema from challenging encounters with applicants. After a period of gentle coaxing to which not one applicant has spoken about anything specifically cinematic and requests to discuss certain films that are meaningful to the aspiring student are met with confusion, Schmerz blurts exasperated, 'just name *a* movie' (italics inserted).

The scene of course omits the keen and cinephile applicants who are on all film courses, and those beset by nerves for whom the process is challenging. Elsewhere in the film there is some nuance on the part of Solondz in terms of an empathy with the students who are of a different generation (many in reality) to the professor teaching them. Following a tutorial with Schmerz where he repeats his aphoristic call to arms 'what if? Then what?' The frustration on the part of the student at not really understanding what that means, and wanting something more specific and guiding from their education is deftly handled, without judgement on Schmerz as a person, even though complaints against his vague teachings are stacking up. The judgement on Schmerz comes later, when a horribly arrogant alum made famous returns to give a masterclass. He mocks Schmerz, who has been persuaded to attend and is sat at the back of the auditorium, by repeating cynically his 'what if? Then what?' (Which isn't a terrible starting point for screenwriting teaching) and following up with the admonishment that 'he's a dinosaur'. Before laughing when he learns that Schmerz was in attendance. Schmerz elicits some audience empathy at this moment, complicating a character who is seen to be pursuing a return to industry filmmaking with ideas that aren't any better than his students in a portrayal that is consistently jaded and melancholic. Solondz, who studied film as a postgraduate but didn't complete, maybe reveals his true feelings

on film education by having the arrogant grad declare ‘nothing can prepare you for the real world. My advice, drop out and make a movie, class is a waste of time’.

In *Dolemite Is My Name*, Rudy Ray Moore (Eddie Murphy) goes to the cinema and watches *The Front Page* (Wilder, 1974) and sees a sea of white people howling with laughter. Confused by what they are laughing at, he decides he can do something similar for black audiences. He pursues a common route in the mid 1970s by going to American International Pictures who turn him down, claiming their Blaxploitation slate is full. Undeterred he finds a local emerging playwright known for social dramas, uses his own money and works with his friends to make the movie he wants and knows will be a hit, independently. Lacking any experience on his crew in key technical roles such as camera and sound, one of the team heads to a nearby Los Angeles film school and brings in Nick Von Sternberg (Kodi Smit-Mcphee in a playfully named role) and acolytes. Nick and his gang don’t know much more than Moore and his friends, but they are treated as equals in a film that celebrates collective, community filmmaking. Moore, in a moment Werner Herzog would have been proud of, teaches Nick and his camera team to steal electricity from the building next door and over the course of production the film students grow in confidence and creativity.

They are made to feel part of the crew, team, family that is making the film. They arrive keen and nervous, wanting the opportunity and to do a good job, but lacking experience. By being treated as equals rather than patronised as students they gain the confidence that comes from trust. They are taught practical things along the way and bring a level of cinematic invention to the proceedings. The film is written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski (who met and graduated together at the famous USC School of Cinematic Arts in California) and is the second time they have created a paean to independent Los Angeles filmmaking in the shadow of the Hollywood sign that is based on a real-life story, following *Ed Wood* (Burton, 1994). Their portrait in *Dolemite* of film students is one of the kindest ever written and manages to never undermine film education while capturing the vital truth that there are things that can’t be taught in a classroom. It is the doing of the making of films that brings so much growth and knowledge to the film students. They learn on the job rather than in class, but this isn’t a smug industry ‘told you so’ to film education, rather a reminder that a film education can play a vital part in the process (and not just by providing Nick’s crew with equipment), alongside professional experiences that feed back into a student’s assessed trajectory, and regardless of what formal Hollywood industry might think of Rudy Ray Moore, he approached his film work professionally, just also with fun.

In *The Souvenir* (2019) and *The Souvenir: Part II* (2021) fun is not a priority for film student Julie, based loosely on director Joanna Hogg's own experiences at film school in this auto fictional diptych. Julie takes her studies seriously. She is serious about cinema and filmmaking and these two films are arguably the films that place a serious engagement with the whole process of film education in the most prominent role in the narratives. Julie's time at film school is an integral part of the story of the two films. It's not peripheral. She throws herself into her filmmaking education before being pulled away by a volatile and passionate relationship that ends in tragedy towards the end of the first film. In the second film she re-engages with filmmaking as means to process profound grief. At nearly all stages it seems she is at odds with the filmmaking tutors at the school. They quiz her, disinterested, about work she wants to make about the working class in England's Northeast - a community Julie has no material affiliation to - and are equally dismissive when she wants to use cinema as means of personal expression that engages more with her own life situation. It is a complicated class statement made by the film. Julie's tutors come across as slightly bitter, failed professionals, employed to teach at an elite, high fee-paying institution, in ways that echo Danny DeVito's character in *Wiener-Dog.* They are also sexist, as their dismissal of all of Julie's personal work echoes criticisms of the spuriousness aimed at women's cinema historically, suggesting that their resentment of Julie's privilege is not a clear-cut case of class prejudice as suggested by the dialogue at the opening of this article.

Throughout *The Souvenir* films we are invited into the film student experience more than in any other film. We are with Julie from interview through graduation screening. We are privy to feedback sessions, crits, we are on set as she is directing, at home while writing, being taught camerawork on the campus soundstage, viewing works in progress in edit suites and seeing the final work that she makes. Her film education was a vital moment in Hogg's life and not merely as the backdrop to a pivotal personal period. *The Souvenir* films are artistic working throughs of memory, grief, and personal growth. Cinematic in their form - shot on a combination of celluloid film stocks - there is a playful, postmodern approach, particularly in *Part II* where Julie's graduation film emerges as a remake of Hogg's *The Souvenir* as she tries to relive and make sense of her relationship with older, now deceased, addict Anthony (Tom Burke) through her film, while also evolving from a work that recalls Hogg's own graduation film *Caprice* (1986). Again, we see the process from one film to the other, moving the story from autobiography to fiction in fascinating ways but doubtless showcasing Hogg's experience as a student finding her voice in defiance of

undeclared expectations from her tutors. These are films that are about finding a personal voice through lived experience and finding an authorial voice in film through education.

It is a shame that Julie's experience is one that is in defiance of those charged with teaching her. Hogg presents with sad irony a moment on a graduation film script panel where tutors declare that Julie's characters 'don't seem to relate to you' despite being based on her and that the film is 'not like Sunderland', despite previously questioning her motivations for working 'radically outside her experience'. Julie's experience with her crew is similarly complex but less comprehensively fractious. There are scenes of creative dysfunction and competing egos, with some class resentment simmering, but overall, the picture is one of passionate collaboration and working together for shared, artistic goals and with faith and belief in Julie's vision as a director, even if her lack of experience and personal distractions sometimes jeopardise the projects. As one crew member asserts in *Part II,* 'we're students, we're still learning' and Hogg's personal portrayals capture the creative drive and inexperience that go side by side in student filmmaking. They also capture some of the negative energies that can be passed down to students from tutors with a complicated relationship to their own practice and industrial filmmaking, where ideas around what industry wants and needs are confusedly passed on to students by people whose own understanding of those wants and needs are warped by experience that has sometimes seen them end up in film education against their initial desires. The final section looks at where some of this confusion and warping may stem from in terms of the history of film education.

Part Three: Historical Tensions Still Playing Out

If the representations of film students from the 2010s present a more nuanced collective portrait of the film student, tensions around industry expectation and cynicism from industry and tutors with a complicated relationship to industry are still present and powerful. This final section will look at where this complex relationship and attendant tensions may come from, by presenting an overview of film education systems in the US and the UK and examples of how industry interference has directly and indirectly reshaped those systems, through fear, to be less about artistic development and more about a servicing of skills. In the US, University of Southern California (USC) has the reputation of the 'Hollywood School' due to its proximity to industry and its famous alumni. This is not a recent development, or even one that followed the 1960s boom. as Duncan Petrie (2010) writes:

> The School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, had been initially established in 1929 as a collaboration between the university and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences intended to bestow academic credibility on the seventh art, and founding faculty included such industry luminaries as Douglas Fairbanks, D.W. Griffith, William deMille, Ernst Lubitsch, Irving Thalberg, and Darryl Zanuck.

This highlights how the involvement of industry in academia was apparent from the earliest days of film education. USC has not evolved into a film school that feeds Hollywood simply because of its geographical proximity. It was established in partnership with one of the leading industrial organisations.

The need for a provider of skilled workers for the domestic American film industry further developed in the 1950s and 1960s as the major studio system changed and largely disbanded. American film schools took on what Petrie (2010) calls ‘greater significance’ as television became more popular and studio dominance waned. More recently, Hollywood has seen corporations consolidate vested interests in areas of content production and exhibition akin to the former ‘vertical integration’ of film studios. But what has not returned, however, is the large scale ‘on the job training’ that was such a feature of the old studio system and where several respected filmmakers of all disciplines learned their trade. It was in this period, the 1950s and 1960s, that another California Film School, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) became prominent with a culture was very different to that of USC. Farber (1984) writes that ‘at UCLA […] in the late 1960s, the students prided themselves on their disdain for Hollywood’ whereas:

> USC, by contrast, operated more along the lines of a trade school. The purpose of its curriculum was specifically to train students to work in the movie business; the studios even offered apprenticeships and fellowships to USC graduates’.

The graduates who emerged from UCLA and USC around this time confirm the prominence and importance of the two schools during this period. They include Francis Ford Coppola, Walter Murch, George Lucas, Paul Schrader, Haskell Wexler and Charles Burnett.

Burnett’s acclaimed *Killer of Sheep* (1978) was his master’s thesis project. Burnett (2002) described his time at UCLA as follows:

> Anarchy reigned – you were self-taught, you learned from other students, the teachers were there for what reason I don't know exactly. But it was fun – there was dialogue and there was always disagreement […] Making films taught us to be independent, to do everything ourselves, and reinforced the anti-Hollywood feeling. It also forced us to come up with our own ideas.

Burnett's comments capture some of the energy that can be found in films such as *Dolemite Is My Name* and *The Souvenir* films. It seems though, that an independent, anti-industry establishment culture was not to last at UCLA. Burnett (2002) says of returning to give lectures at UCLA as an alumnus that:

> It's not like [it was when I was there] now. I lectured there, and the students have professional people working on their films […] their only concern is 'How do I get in?' It's not about art, or 'I have this to say' […] Looking back […] I think if we'd taken it more as a business we'd have been wiser. But then we probably wouldn't have done it.

USC has remained the film school with the closest industry links and that's not merely due to proximity, as cultural changes at UCLA indicate. The USC model is one that has always been interested in commercial returns and rooted in film industry practice. Each year many projects vie for a limited amount of financing and filmmakers are required to sell or pitch their project in terms that guarantee approval. It is lot of pressure for students as they try to get their project 'green lit', a pressure that can detract from creative expression and the ability to learn by mistakes.

Kevin Reynolds (quoted in Farber, 1984), a USC graduate and director of *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) among other films, states 'what they try to teach at USC is practical filmmaking. They want to teach you to make the kind of film that is made in the industry'. This relationship to industry is arguably why USC has remained a largely solid entity in terms of industry perception, whereas other film schools and educational organisations have often had to shift their activity through industry's scepticism or hostility. The desire on the side of the academia to introduce nuanced, complex pedagogic engagements to film through the study of the medium date back to cinema's early days. Concurrent with the emergence of USC as an industry training school, academics at Harvard were keen on introducing film studies to their curriculum. Polan (2008)

describes how attempts to create film courses at Harvard in 1927 were rooted in the ethos that film ‘so obviously the product of business, could […] be demonstrated to offer artistry and uplift, [and] might serve as a propitious mediator of the various missions of the university between spiritual quest and practical service’ (2008: 94). The Harvard approach was proposed as one that focused on the practical business side of film and included elements familiar to other fields within the Humanities. Polan (2008) also explains how film had the potential to be ‘welcomed by a new sort of academic cultural custodian who would see that its status as an art of mechanical reproducibility posed an interesting challenge.’ (2008: 95). Unfortunately, this never really materialised then, due to already simmering tensions between the academy industry and their uneasy compatriots, theory and practice.

Often, theory and practice are substituted in common understanding in film education to education and training. Adams (2011: 119) contends that ‘it is rarely productive to place training and education on opposite sides of a binary divide – all practice requires the acquisition and application of skills and knowledge across a spectrum’. Yet, this is what has occurred systemically throughout film education history, with industry seeing the academy’s responsibility to train workers, rather than educate artists. Petrie and Stoneman (2014), writing about the diverse responsibilities film schools have undertaken, claim that, historically:

> Beyond their primary role in training creative practitioners, film schools have also provided a fertile environment for wider research and study of the moving image [making] as important a contribution to the development and wider promotion of the history, theory and criticism of the ‘seventh art’ as they did to the training of practitioners. The significance of such intellectual activity also helped ensure that, within the film school environment, theory and practice were frequently interdependent and mutually reinforcing facets of the educational process (2014: 04).

An example of this holistic, complex, and integrated approach to film education, in a UK context, can be found in the early days of the National Film School, later the National Film and Television School (NFTS). Petrie (2011) observes that there was a resistance to industrial involvement in the early years of the National Film and Television School (NFTS) where founding director Colin Young deployed a bottom-up, student-led model that was ‘fundamentally geared towards the

formation of film-makers as essentially self-reliant, ideas-driven, cultural producers' and was not concentrating on 'reproducing skilled technicians'.

However, this approach from Young was soon changed to focus more on craft skills and professional development through pressure from the school's industrial partners seeking to protect their interests. Within universities, the race to stay relevant and recruit has seen film programmes move away from what might be termed artistic or theoretical engagement in pursuit of student numbers and industry accreditation and partnerships. Bell (2004: 738) claims that 'media and film studies programmes have for many years played the vocational card in their attempts to woo both students and support from within their own universities'. The pressure from industry has manifested in many ways over many years. Bolas (2009) describes how prior to its 1970s institutionalisation, film studies was a 'marginal' discipline that was facilitated by 'flexible institutional apparatus […] operating within the culture' of universities. Pre-1970, in 'most institutions' screen education was frequently extra-curricular: the film society and film-making club' (2009: 02-03). He also argues that the term 'film appreciation' was problematic and that it 'tended to be deployed rather than scrutinised' adding that the definition of the term was never really clarified (2009: 05). It is a term however that has been in use since the emergence of an education focus within the newly formed British Film Institute in the 1930s.

In the early years of the institutionalisation of 'film appreciation' Nowell-Smith (2012: 16/17) argues that the development of the BFI met with resistance from the British film industry despite a stated 'film appreciation' agenda. He claims that the formation of the BFI with government and industry support was conditional on board-level involvement from representatives of production, distribution, and exhibition to ensure that activity was limited to cultural appreciation only and did not seek to engage with industrial concerns. As with changes at UCLA that saw the loss of 'anarchy' and creative freedom of expression in favour of business concerns, and the erosion of student voice and similar freedoms at the NFTS, industry scepticism over what a film education is and could do has seen it interfere with film education through distrust and, arguably, misunderstanding. The binary forms of film education, theory on one side and practice on the other, emerged quickly due to one main factor, the film industry. Nowell-Smith (2012) discusses the formation of the BFI noting that, 'most of the members of the commission were educationists of one kind or another – teachers, lecturers, local education authority officers, etc.' (2012: 15). Following receipt of government funding in June 1930 and in preparation for its initial report, the commission held a conference. Trades (the industry) were consulted and as Nowell-Smith

explains '[Sir Benjamin] Gott took charge of relations with the film trade, which at this stage was guarded but not unfriendly in its approach to the Commission and its activities' (2012: 16).

The commission published its first full report in June 1932 with the title The Film in National Life. Immediately it caused concern within the film industry. They did not like the idea of an institute. Their response clearly set out their strong belief that 'As far as the majority of legislators were concerned, cinema was first and foremost an industry and the role of the film in national cultural life was no concern of theirs (2012: 17)'. In return for accepting the formation of an institution the film trade lobbied that one third of the governing body should be representatives from trade. From a contemporary perspective it is apparent that this was the first and most serious move to ensure that cultural appreciation and professional production interests were kept separate. The trade responded to this early report with the view that:

> So long as the new institute confined itself to educational and instructional films, all was well. But if, under the banner of raising cultural levels, the institute began to interfere in matters such as censorship, or simply engage in denigrating standard movie-house fare, and if furthermore it were to do so with funds raised by taxing popular entertainment, then the trade saw an unwarranted threat to its interests (Nowell-Smith: 16).

This exemplifies the insecurity felt by the British film industry towards academic facing areas of film culture, and further exemplifies the tension between theory and practice in British film history. This is one of several cases, described here, where industrial concerns have impacted the focus and nature of film education and with these tensions so prevalent for so long, and so felt within both academy and industry it is no wonder that the depiction of film students on screen, and film education more broadly, has so often skewed negative, suspicious, undermining.

Conclusion

There are other, non-anglophone narrative films with more complex and varied representations of film students and graduates. There is Shujun Wei's *Striding into the Wind* (2020) from China, and *A Paris Education* (Civeyrac, 2018) from France. In addition, Claire Simon's *The Graduation* (2016), which looks at the practice of elite French film school La Fémis is an important non-fiction work regarding film education. However, the relationship between film education and film industry

is very different (though no less volatile) in these places. It is interesting that across film history in the US and UK there have been so few representations of film students on screen, until the historical relationship between education and industry is analysed. What is a revealed is a distrust that arguably flows both ways, and could be seen as contributing to why this lack occurs. Of the ideological arms of academia and industry, theory and practice, McLuskie (2000) writes that:

> The dichotomy between theory and practice is rife within the industry itself [and] within teaching institutions staff can unwittingly support this dichotomy [practical tutors] are not adverse to light-hearted suggestions that [academic staff] who have never made a film are not qualified to comment on them (2000: 106).

And yet these practical tutors are often practitioners who have 'failed' in industry, ending up as tutors rather than 'professionals'. That weight is carried into the classroom and onto students. Similarly, the image of film studies professors as pretentious, detached from the realities of film production and overly interested in textual analysis isn't merely something drawn from imagination, though it may be exaggeration.

Film Studies as a discipline has had to fight historically to first carve out a unique space in sceptical fine arts and humanities departments, the latter dominated by English Literature, and later to defend itself and its intellectual strength against charges of being a 'Mickey Mouse' degree, leaving it unsure of how to best articulate what it does that serves those in search of cultural knowledge and/or a practical career. Film education in the UK and US, USC aside, has not found or maintained a clear, confident identity with which to counter industry hostility, and looking at the list of films discussed in this article it is telling how many were produced outside of a studio production context, and until recently depictions have failed to represent film students as anything other than a largely monolithic set of narcissists who have no concept of either a 'real' world or the film industry and film culture. The film texts discussed in part one indicates a trend for representations of film students that echo the historical scepticism and hostility towards film education as discussed in the historical texts referenced in part three. However, as the texts discussed in part two highlight, representations of film students in the 2010s have sought to counter those narrow ideas and introduce to audiences film education as a more nuanced and complex space than previous works. In addition to a deeper engagement with film education, the students of *Dear White People, Dolemite Is My Name* and *The Souvenir* films enlarge wider understandings of student experience in relation to race, gender, class, and vocational learning

that mark these films in particular out as astute critiques of not just film education, but US and UK higher education systems more broadly.

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Filmography

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