

## Translations: encounters with popular film and academic discourse

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## Translations

### *Encounters with popular film and academic discourse*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the relationship between informal knowledge of popular film and its study in higher education. Through interviews, it explores the significance people give to their encounters with films and with critical discourses upon them. The interviewees' class and gender positions variously constrain or motivate their educational aspirations and thus complicate the hope that film and media studies can successfully address 'non-traditional' students. How students watch films and how their knowledge of them is negotiated within families, among friends and at work should be a more central concern. In higher education, students may be more effectively supported and encouraged where some effort is made to engage with the cultures of reception in which they are located. To enable students to 'translate' between common sense and academic modes of discourse on film requires explicit reflection on the differences between fans and casual viewers on the one hand, and academically motivated viewers on the other.

**KEYWORDS** *academic discourse, class, common sense, gender, identity, popular film*

I was a complete idiot at school, all my GCSEs and A-levels were achieved at FE [further education]. I have become interested in teaching in FE and I have this notion that film and media is an ideal area in which to attract people into education. I have to be careful when I say that in case people think that I am in some way saying that I believe film/media studies are in some way secondary. I don't mean that, it is just that I think a film or TV text can often be a way into academia especially for those disaffected by education because of what I see as its middle-classness. (Naomi)

## Introduction

In this article I want to present some aspects of an enquiry into how people talk about both the place of popular films in their lives and their encounters with critical discourse on such films. Three people figure here. One is a firefighter, one a care worker and one a hairdresser – Michael, Naomi and Andy (see Appendix). The class and gender character of their work features significantly in their self-accounts. What it means to each of them to be ‘knowledgeable’ about film is a matter for careful negotiation. Michael and Naomi are also undergraduate film studies students. Andy has never made film an object of formal study. The context of this enquiry is that of expanded access to higher education in the past decade in the UK and, particularly, of the access offered to ‘mature’ students, many of whom are from working-class backgrounds or are involved in ‘non-professional’ occupations. Michael, Naomi and Andy – all in their thirties – each provide thoughtful, and strongly felt, commentaries on their relationship to formal education.

There is a notable history of autobiographical reflection on the movement from a ‘working-class’ location to one inside the world of academia. Indeed some of those who appear securely to inhabit the world of critical discourse (on film or other matters), but actually continue to feel that they do not quite belong there, have published vivid personal accounts in recent years; Steedman (1986), Walkerdine (1986, 1990), Kuhn (1995), Skeggs (1997) and Roberts (1998) are of particular interest. Although these have formed an essential and significant background to this enquiry, I am concerned here not with those who are well advanced upon academic careers, but with people who are occupying a more liminal space and are perhaps faced more immediately with disjunctions between discourses that are current in the academic world and those encountered in work and informal relations with friends and family. In this respect, although the research has been conducted through life-history interviews which are focused on the particular topic of popular film and critical discourse, it has much in common with some aspects of Bourdieu et al. (1999) and Ball et al. (2000), studies very much concerned with people caught up in transitional and uncertain circumstances.

There is an educational argument here. Studying film, television and other popular media has appeared to offer students the opportunity to use their informal cultural experience as a resource in an academic field. Some teachers have regarded popular film as likely to attract students otherwise reluctant to enter higher education:

The attraction of teaching film was that it seemed to offer relevance and engagement to students. Precisely because it was not a legitimate subject, there was a chance of involving in discussion students who were normally bored or passive. (Brunsdon, 1997: 129)



Perhaps, for both teachers and students, such studies have allowed a disavowal of the academic ‘middle-classness’ invoked by Naomi in the epigraph to this article. But how academic discourse about film is engaged is a complicated matter, as the three cases presented here show.

## **Schooled and unschooled readings**

In the following discussion I focus on my respondents’ stories about film and television both in their informal lives, in the routine organization of everyday life, and in their experience as subjects in the educational domain. Normally, most people do not approach films and television as objects requiring study. On the contrary, people make them meaningful and pleasurable, easily and immediately within their taken-for-granted cultures of reception. For example, most people choosing to watch a new teen horror film feel that they both ‘understand’ and ‘enjoy’ what they watch. They know earlier films, some very similar. They know the stars and their other roles. They know how to watch such films – often in company with others – and how to tell others about them. By contrast, watching an early ‘horror’ film – *Nosferatu* perhaps – is likely to be regarded as a more work-like activity, and thus as belonging to an educational setting. There, people routinely assume that films cannot be read as sufficiently meaningful without specialized mediation – by a teacher, by reading textual analysis and critique. But what happens when teachers bring the already read, sufficiently meaningful, film into the educational setting? There the film is relocated as requiring work if students are to achieve a reading that teachers judge to be sufficient in that context.

The metaphor of translation, given in the title of this article, implies changes in meaning, in speakers’ identities, and the relative power of the languages and discourses between which translation occurs.<sup>1</sup> The metaphor can suggest questions of loss and gain in moving a film from the informal to the formal domain. In the academic study of film, text ‘analysis’ is exemplified by skilled specialists in the discipline. Such specialists exercise an authority over the texts they thus ‘claim’ not dissimilar to that exercised by literary critics. The course taken by the students interviewed for this article states that one of the subject’s aims is ‘to *replace* primary concentration on the merits and demerits of particular films with the examination of particular theories’ (emphasis added). Reading and analysis are to be taught and, on the whole, are not regarded as already accomplished by, and within the informal competence of, untrained film viewers. Indeed, those students who do regard themselves as especially knowledgeable – as fans of a particular genre, director or actor – may be regarded as most likely to have problems with the discourses current within the discipline and with writing essays appropriate to film studies (personal communication from a film studies lecturer).



The pedagogy implicit here, to the extent that it denies legitimacy to non-specialist readings, may limit any very sustained engagement with students' prior construction of meaning around particular film texts. Yet research into popular television and its audiences has raised, if indirectly, wider questions about the assumed authority of academic readings. For example, the assumption of the relative incompetence of students is potentially thrown into question by Robert Allen's (1983, 1985) argument that soap opera viewers, committed over many years to regular and frequent viewing of particular shows, have access to layers of meaning, and of pleasure, that are not available to professional critics. Such critics – and this can be extended to include some academic viewers – may sample a few episodes and no more and thus never reach that threshold at which the 'text' becomes meaningful to the committed viewer. Clearly, the reading of texts varies with the conditions in which they are encountered and the social practices of those who, with different purposes, give them attention.

### **Life-histories: Michael**

In analysing my respondents' talk, I have attended to the discursive positions taken by the speakers and to the 'interpretative repertoires' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 149)<sup>2</sup> or 'vocabularies of motive' (Wright Mills, 1959: 162) that they employ. A 'vocabulary of motives' does not refer to motives as pre-existent internal entities<sup>5</sup> awaiting expression in the vocabularies that a language makes available, but to modes of explanation through which respondents may constitute themselves as individuals – with 'histories', 'reasons' and indeed 'motives' for what they do. Thus 'agency' and 'affect' are produced and enacted in the terms that particular discourses make available.

'Mature' students, like Michael, a firefighter in his thirties, are now quite numerous in higher education in the UK. Why did he choose to study film?

Well my dad was a film editor . . . He was one of the top film editors in the music industry so, for instance, he edited *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*, the Sex Pistols film; *Absolute Beginners*, he was the top editor on that, and all of the pop promos in that period late '70s [to] early '80s, Culture Club, Musical Youth . . . He died quite young of cancer, yeah, so I think it's always been in my blood really . . . Ultimately it was a case of, it's in my blood and I let a bit of time go by. I joined the fire brigade when I was younger, I thought that was what I wanted to do, you know, and then some time went by and I wasn't really happy, I think I've got a creative streak inside me that I wasn't really using.

26 In this first response he displaces himself, invoking the precedent set by his father. His father's work, his skill and the knowledge he gave access to,



figure as a point of origin for the 'I', initially so marginal. Employing what I will call a vocabulary of 'succession' and of 'inheritance', Michael identifies his present self through the invocation of an inner quality implicitly acquired from his father: 'in my blood', 'a creative streak inside me'. But in his work, he is a firefighter; he's slim, fit, muscular, with hair cut short. In a bodily sense he seemed fully identified with what he does. At our first meeting, he came with a substantial folder of his writing and gave me copies of his 'online' film reviews. In reading back over what he had to say, and remembering his presence in the interview, I was inclined to see a tension out of which, as the interview developed across our two meetings, he generated a narrative of 'self-realization'.

The central event in the first interview with Michael was the telling of 'a mad story'. It is a rapid, detailed, reworking of a story no doubt told many times before, but given here as a decisive turning-point: recovering the vocabulary of succession but also extending that of 'creativity' as an expression of an inner, individual, quality:

I wrote this . . . kind of riposte . . . to a review of a record by Manic Street Preachers that I quite liked at the time, you know, and I just sent it into *Melody Maker*, just something I wrote on a whim, off the cuff: 'Oh I'll do this, see what happens', didn't even expect it to get printed and the next week, it was Letter of the Week and I thought 'Wow look at that!' And I was in a pub with the guys from work just before we started a shift and I was showing 'em this thing and they were reading it and going, 'I don't understand a word you've written you know, what's it supposed to be about.' 'It's about this song, it's about this record, it's a single.' It was about this song called *Kevin Carter*, about a photographer who took pictures in Rwanda . . . won the Pulitzer Prize and he was so overcome with guilt for having come to fame through . . . getting pictures of people dead and dying and stuff, that he killed himself . . .

That night I had to go and stand-by at another fire station . . . I had to go on the tube and there was a bloke reading the *Melody Maker* next to me and he was reading the very letter that I had written, and I was standing there and thinking, 'Oh that's my letter and he's reading it.' It was such a buzz . . . it was such a buzz, and so I started trying to write stuff and sending it in to *Melody Maker* and *NME* [*New Musical Express*] and so forth and got absolutely nowhere 'cause my writing was poor really, I had the talent and the ability but it wasn't developed, you know, and my girlfriend said she'd heard on GLR [Greater London Radio] that if anyone wanted to [do] these reviews of gigs, come in the morning after and review a gig, they could phone up. So I did, I phoned up, I said I could do that so they gave me a chance. I was doing it for as long as this guy named Gideon Coe was doing the breakfast show.

In Denzin's terms, this is an epiphany – and perhaps, in particular, a cumulative epiphany: 'the cumulative or *representative event* . . . signifies eruptions or reactions to experiences which have been going on for a long



period of time' (1989: 71). In his narrative reconstruction, Michael defines a new subject position from which to renegotiate his relationship to popular culture, to work and to the people with whom he works. Such renegotiations, and their retelling in narrative moments of this kind, further reflexively transform and separate out a distinctive sense of self. But in the account he gives, he moves *between*, and not simply *from*, 'firefighter' to 'writer'. And hence, perhaps, the continuing tension.

In enacting this movement, and securing the new subject position, he draws upon a number of prior vocabularies of motive. His first published piece of writing is a 'riposte', written 'on a whim', 'off the cuff'. It is personal, emotional, and thus 'authentic'. But, through publication, it becomes an unintended act of self-recognition: as a *writer* and in the *public* domain. Through a series of contingent events the connection between his writing and a reader becomes vivid proof of a power to address unknown others. Furthermore, by recovering the words of his fellow workers, 'the guys in the pub', expressing surprise and incomprehension, he positions himself as 'other', addressed as *with*, but emerging as separate *from*, them. Narratively, it is a *recovery* of the 'creative' self, inside. That 'creativity', his 'talent', and the logic of succession to his father – positioned as creative in the public domain – are re-engaged in this narrative of transformation. Telling the story, and giving me examples of his writing, further enacts and confirms the trajectory of the new self.

But his claim to this new self is also uncertain and insecure. He tells further stories of failure to find outlets for his writing and doubts about its value. But he cites the advice of his girlfriend intervening to direct him first to GLR, and later, another 'voice' nudging him towards university:

I was still trying to get stuff printed in *Q* magazine and not getting very far and then I think someone said, 'You should go to university, you could learn loads of stuff, you could develop your writing ability.' That was really the reason I came to university – to learn how to write better, you know, and just increase my knowledge and various things and I thought, well, film's a natural thing to do.

Becoming a student is, at first, about securing himself as a writer. But it is also an ambivalent recognition of, and a partial quest for, academic legitimation. There is a progressive distancing from more everyday talk about film, but no unequivocal movement from common sense discourse to the discourses of film studies. Between academic 'navel-gazing' and the 'populist', he defines his position as 'natural'. Whatever his doubts, the vocabulary of succession, the conviction that knowing about film, and to some extent popular music, is integral to his identity, consistently underpins his current trajectory:



It's funny, it's almost like arrogance, it's almost like I knew I could do it. It's like I'm writing about music, writing about music's more of a challenge than writing about film. It was an arrogant thing, it was a naive thing because, you know, I used to read, like, *Time Out*, the criticism in *Time Out*, which was always very good, always very well informed. For me to imagine that I could write anything at that standard, I mean, now I'd find it hard but then there was no way I could've written to that standard because they're all informed by film criticism . . . by film studies . . . No, it was kind of arrogant of me to assume all I wanted to do was go to university, learn to write better, read a bit here, and a bit there and then I'll be ready to go, that sort of thing. But it's been a brilliant experience so far, I've learnt loads and loads, I think there's loads and loads I'm critical about, ambivalent about, a lot of navel-gazing goes on.

If film is in his 'blood' – and elsewhere in the interview he refers, if with a slightly ironic smile, to his implicitly natural 'good taste' – why and in what ways does he need to study it? What exactly is it that he thinks he needs to learn? In acknowledging the weight of academic discourse, he also refers to himself as 'arrogant' and 'naive'. Despite the often derogatory sense of these terms, they further the narrative of himself as so immersed in film that he has no need to acquire an understanding that is intrinsic to him. *And yet* he has a need to learn how to talk and to write about film in order to appear to others, where film is a matter of knowledgeable debate, as who he believes himself to be. Caught within this paradox, he positions himself as both natural and incomplete. So he both claims and disowns the 'arrogance' which marked that phase in which he believed himself to be already what he now concedes, although with significant misgivings, he has to learn to become.

He manages this paradox, in practice, by locating himself both as a mature student and as a writer in the public, *but not academic*, domain:

I write reviews at the moment for an internet magazine . . . I think you'll find them quite interesting because I am absolutely convinced that I would not be able to write the reviews I'm writing now without the input I've had and the learning I've done at university.

Does what he reads, and what he is taught, displace his 'natural' knowledge? Perhaps a particularly striking instance of his self-positioning emerged in the comments that he made on *Fight Club*:

You'll see the reviews I've written, they're in layman's language still but I don't hide the fact that I've assimilated some film studies language . . .

There's one review, of *Fight Club* for instance, where I basically say at the end of it [that] film academics are going to say this and this about it . . . but in actual fact, it's all rubbish, it's actually this . . . just a Hollywood film . . . But the point is I wouldn't have been able to make that . . . disavowal, if you like,





of highbrow film criticism, analysis of that film, if I hadn't assimilated some of it . . . I can be a little bit playful with film studies theory . . . because I'm not in thrall to it but I am interested by it, and I'm quite selective about what I decide is useful and what I decide isn't useful and is completely academic and is of no use to any one outside the four walls of the university.

I feel I can do that because of having some experience in life as well, you know, life and death situations, seeing people die and stuff like that, understanding mortality and that kind of thing. I think it helps me have another approach, a synthesis of different approaches. I can draw upon the theory that I think is really useful, really good, reject what I don't and combine it with my life experience.

The position from which he claims a critical autonomy – repeatedly he asserts 'I decide' – is constructed here as the outcome of a life ('my 32 years' life-experience') and the sometimes extreme situations that he has encountered. In this respect his 'critical self' is a narrative achievement: he constitutes himself through the stories he does, or could, tell and through the fast and confident and ironically arrogant way in which he tells them. He speaks with a sense of situated and embodied intellect, and defines his critical practice with striking physicality: 'I'd rather tear the back out of films from a distance.' As I note below, 'to discuss' a film appears to entail a subject position unwelcome to many men and boys in working-class cultural contexts. Here, his bodily presence is significant, not least because he also repeatedly identified himself as a 'film-buff'. If, for some men, masculinity is compromised by too exclusive an involvement with writing and reading, or with 'women's genres' of film and television, for Michael the risk of seeing, and writing about, a great many films is countered in several ways. First, his writing does not entail their public *discussion*. On the contrary, his style of reviewing is 'punchy', 'provocative', its 'posture' uncompromising and assertive. Second, the films to which he refers clearly address a male audience. It is no surprise that the film to which he especially drew my attention, *Fight Club*, is one where male physical violence is a pervasive, if ultimately ironic, motif. And finally, to reiterate, he sustains a work identity requiring fitness and strength.

For him, writing is action in a domain by no means confined to the implicitly 'precious' academic world (Connell, 1995; Redman and Mac an Ghail, 1997). He locates himself as an actor in a world outside 'the four walls of the university'. By refusing to be contained, he is thus able to see through, and maintain control over, academic criticism not exclusively by theoretical argument, but by positioning himself, like Janus, looking both ways at the threshold between worlds, translating between academic and everyday fields of knowledge.

The basis of his own sense of a cohesive self is clearly problematic and has to be worked at. As Giddens (1991: 54) suggests, a person's identity is



to be found ‘in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*’. Here, Michael comments on the immediate physical proximity of two disparate sites of identification:

It’s weird . . . I remember I did this review of *The Insider*, I watched the film at the Plaza which is on Shaftesbury Avenue and it’s across the road from the fire station and I’ve worked there, I’ve done shifts there, and it just seemed so strange, these two worlds are so different, you know . . . This sort of fire-fighters’ world, you know, very sort of macho, non-academic, non-intellectual really . . . Really worthwhile job and everything, but the worlds are so different and there’s me, you know, with all these sort of academic, journo types, settling down to watch a film, making notes. The worlds are so different so it’s quite strange.

Rather than argue that he achieves a coherent and viable integration of these two worlds, I have suggested that Michael constructs himself in talk somewhat ‘as his own man’, as constructing an autonomy out of a discourse of male succession, because his experiences are disparate. He makes himself his father’s son. Thus located in a discourse of succession and inheritance, other subject positions are made temporary, finite or less than integral to the self that he has both recovered and made. He constructs himself as occupying a vantage point from which to survey, without risk of being dispersed among, the disparate elements in his experience.

### **Life-histories: Naomi**

Naomi is also a mature student. I talked to her just as she was about to graduate. Again, a singular ‘self’ emerges through a narrative in which self-positioning in a class discourse becomes central:

I came here and looked round and felt comfortable with the place, I suppose it’s like a big FE college isn’t it, I didn’t feel intimidated by it. I never in my wildest dreams ever thought I’d ever get to go to university and, you know, I don’t think I’d have been comfortable in a posh place, so I stayed here and felt comfortable and stayed the three years.

I left school in 1982 with one CSE pass in Art. I was hopeless at school, I hated every minute of it . . . I just detested school, archetypal horrible child really, I played truant, didn’t go in and didn’t do the work. I must’ve been reasonably bright because I got put down to do O-levels but I didn’t pass anything, I didn’t turn up or didn’t pass and did actually get kicked out of the exam once, it was quite horrible. And then I sort of drifted into care work after that and did nursing, nurse training, auxiliary nurse, care assistant . . . I had absolutely zilch confidence and sort of stayed in care work . . . I had an interest in horse-riding and I was sort of contented that I could finance my horse-riding, my hobby, with my work and just looked upon work as being a necessity really. . .



Throughout the interview she emphatically positions herself as ‘working class’ and actively subordinates the other, possibly contradictory, positions implied by ‘horse-riding’, or later by portraying herself as ‘the child in the playground with a book’ or by taking pleasure in ‘academic work’. In her account, the position she could adopt, intellectually, only became possible when the introduction of wordprocessing enabled her to circumvent the somewhat vulnerable identity she believed to be inscribed in her writing:

I’ve got the most awful handwriting that nobody can read and I think that at that time at school, if your work was untidy, not presentable, it would get put down, you know, so that didn’t help my confidence. It wasn’t until I eventually sat down in front of a PC, I blossomed then.

Michael’s ‘turning point’ was the publication of a letter, and the recovery of a pre-existing self. For Naomi, although accomplished by the more immediate translation allowed by a personal computer (PC), it is also a matter of ‘retrieval’. It is perhaps especially important that this translation is achieved through an external means, a technological device, rather than through any more ‘intrinsic’ change in her ‘self’. Who she is does not change. The self she constructs in dialogue with me is produced as consistent, enduring from childhood to the present: becoming a student is not a transformation. To ‘blossom’ is to open out and display what has already been formed ‘inside’. She thus rejects the negative positioning of working-class subjects as failures and as educable only through a repositioning as middle class (Kuhn, 1995). Becoming a student does not displace earlier ‘selves’; on the contrary, it allows her to make visible a self coexisting with, and for others concealed by, apparently contradictory subject positions. Like Michael, she has to write – through the PC and in higher education – to appear to others as who she already believes herself to be:

I was struggling to remember, when you were talking about my lack of success at school, why I felt alienated and I do remember thinking the teachers were terribly . . . I don’t think I had words for it then, but there was definitely something different about them to me, the way they spoke, you know. Education really wasn’t anything to do with me, I do remember thinking that and it probably does base some of the ideas I have.

I was very conscious of being working class, particularly, it sounds strange. I was interested in horse-riding, that would sort of confound it; grew up on a council estate, still live on a council estate, definitely everything working class . . . my dad’s a carpenter and my mother at the time was working in a school kitchen.

Why she became a student in film studies, rather than in English perhaps, is construed in terms of her need to negotiate her way into



education from a position of prolonged ‘disaffection’. In an email in response to my initial request for an interview, she wrote:

I did A-level film studies as an evening class at my local FE college, I chose it because it seemed to cover ground from a variety of disciplines, sociology, critical theory, literary theory, etc. Oddly, I wouldn’t say I am the world’s biggest film fan and I watch relatively little TV, but I do enjoy the academic debate around the subject. I was desperate to leave my job of nine years as a warden of a sheltered housing scheme and a full-time degree was an escape hatch as much as anything else. I came to [her university] and I could do film studies with critical theory (my minor subject). I have become more enthusiastic about education generally since doing a degree. *I was a complete idiot at school.* (emphasis added)

Once again, it is from a position within a discourse of class – in which academia is primarily middle class – that she defines film studies as a point of entry for people ‘outside’ education (Kuhn, 1995). Yet her own ‘pleasure’ is located very explicitly in the adoption of a critical, intellectual stance in relation to film:

I can’t honestly say I was the world’s greatest film fan and I know that sounds strange . . . I can remember staying up one night to watch *The Wicker Man* and Hammer horror, that sort of thing I was very interested in, but to be truthful I think it was, when I did film studies, it was the academic approaches to it that interested me, critical approaches to the subject that fascinated me . . . It was the challenge of the work that interested me . . .

I used to have a habit of going home at lunchtime, with every intention of coming back and then putting on the afternoon matinee or something like that or putting a piece of music on or picking a book up and it got harder and harder to go back . . . I’ve got a great capacity for watching rubbish when I should be doing something else . . . Well, I suppose it’s arguable whether it’s rubbish, but I’d rather watch anything than go back to school . . . I remember watching a lot of Ealing comedies that were on . . . I remember watching a fair few melodramas that I can’t remember the names of, but sometimes I’ve been reading about them in an academic film book and I’ve thought, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve seen that.’

For this student, then, the more ‘distracted’ pleasures of viewing, reading or listening, are acknowledged but also somewhat subordinated to (re)approaching texts in a way which is ‘critical’, ‘academic’, a ‘challenge’. She thus positions herself as, precisely, *a working-class intellectual* and thus it is essential that she does not distance herself from the pleasures of analytical work: to do so would allow the recuperation of such pleasures as necessarily middle class, a perspective she is determined to contest. How secure this position might be is in some question. There are two problems:

first, one unacknowledged consequence is that by distancing herself from 'rubbish' she thus endorses what Ang (1985: 96) has called the 'ideology of mass culture' and, if only momentarily, implies some endorsement of a hierarchy of cultural value. Second, the implicit reference to 'women's genres' (see Brunson, 1997: 172–88) involves a disavowal of gender in favour of her more singular self-construction as working class.

### **Life-histories: Andy**

I wanted to talk to someone with a relatively unschooled interest in film and no 'investment' in translating informal experience into those forms that are accorded value in education. By contrast with the students discussed so far, Andy, a hairdresser, engaged with film entirely informally. Of Greek-Cypriot origin, Andy left school at about 17 and has worked as a hairdresser – not a distinctively male occupation – for most of his adult life. Like Michael and Naomi, he is in his thirties. The following commentary on critics brings into play a discourse of common sense *affective* appreciation:

Critics . . . my argument with the whole thing is I just find some of them, not all of them, just too critical. My friend George, he's a fanatic, he studies film – he's actually got a degree in film and he reviews for, like, a university magazine, you know, if you sat here with him you'd just wanna slap him, you know what I mean, he just like goes into little crap things. To me they're crap; you say, 'What did you think of so and so?' 'Yeah, it was really good but it didn't do very well at the box office, it only turned over 20 million dollars.' What's how much money it made got to do with whether it was a good film or not? He's just really picky, really picky: 'I didn't like the lighting, didn't like the camera angles.' Who gives a shit? Did it move you, did it make you laugh, did it make you cry, did it scare you?

That is my answer, that is to me what a film is really, what a film should do. If you're going to be a critic . . . just tell them what the film was like: it was great, it was crap. We don't care how much computer-generated imagery was involved or whether someone looked convincing or not, did it do the job? People can slag loads of films off but if a film moves you . . . to me *Rocky* is, it was on like a couple of weeks ago, one of the best boxing films out, that one and *Raging Bull* . . . The first one, it deserved the Oscar, it deserved an Oscar nomination for Stallone as best actor 'cause it done the job, it was convincing. You know what I mean, the others are money, franchise jobs – they're only there to make money.

There's no equivocation here. George is 'picky' and, in Andy's terms, deserves to be 'slapped' – and is thus positioned as a woman because, as he had explained to me on another occasion, in Greek-Cypriot culture a man



would at least merit a proper blow (with a fist rather than an open hand). Masculinity as physical confrontation and as self-assertion figures here, recalling of course Michael's discussion of *Fight Club* (see also Walkerdine, 1986). For Andy, films are valued in terms of affect: the discourse is one in which the achievement of an emotional response in the audience, perhaps appropriate to the genre, is the only criterion by which a film might be judged (see Bourdieu, 1986; and Ang, 1985 on the ideology of populism). Although he shares with Michael a scepticism towards critical elaboration, he is far more vehement in positioning himself as rooted in common-sense, as if to be otherwise might invite ridicule:

*The Matrix* . . . you'll get the guy who's really into it and say, yeah, it's all about this and all about that. It's just, you know, a rollercoaster – enjoy it for the experience, don't try and suss it out 'cause you can't . . . I've learnt to be not so serious with films now, just take them for what they are, and understand them for what they are and try not, you know, like *The Sixth Sense*, it's as simple as what it was, you know, it's supposed to catch you up hard at the end, blow your brain out, thinking, like, 'I had no idea.' That's it, don't try and look any deeper into it. Films don't have souls, it's celluloid, you know what I mean, you make of it what you want. But don't try and make something of it, to find hidden messages unless they're there.

So although films may be powerfully affective, they are also only 'celluloid'. Meaning and affect here are made a private matter – 'you make of it what you want' – and to articulate a metadiscourse in which wider meanings are constructed and debated, and thus to enter the domain of 'discussion', is unacceptable. 'I've learnt not to be so serious with films now' suggests a process of withdrawal from the risk of appearing to discuss and thus to be serious about what he watches. In Sara Bragg's (2000) research into teaching the horror genre, she reports that for some boys to 'discuss' films with other fans was unacceptable. Bragg suggests that, in their terms, 'discussing' 'positions one as feminine' (2000: 167). If to be positioned as a participant in discussion is to be feminized, then perhaps that risks becoming both too vulnerable to the censure of male others *and* to the affective power of what is just 'celluloid'. Andy has to deal with the contradiction between his emotional engagement with films and the consequences of talking about them too much or in the wrong way. Thus he makes no explicit claim to be 'knowledgeable' about film. What he knows about film and music is conveyed implicitly through his sustained participation in a relatively unfocused, desultory, *conversation*.

In responding to my unusually purposeful and direct questions, he positions himself primarily in terms of maturity and immaturity; being 'knowledgeable' or not, is subordinated to that axis of judgement. To position himself as mature, he stresses what he has learned about how to act in relating to film, as I suggested above. But he also brings his



cousin into an imagined alternative to the interview in which he was participating:

It would be fascinating . . . for you to talk to my cousin John, more as like an alternative view, because if you're talking to me, I love film, I love music, and I can tell you in a way predictably what you wanna hear . . . I love film and music for what it is. 'Don't criticize it', that's the most controversial thing I can say, but to get you a session with my cousin John and for you to find out what ticks in his brain, that would be serious.

With John, it's just his taste, I mean with John you can sit down and say, 'Did you enjoy Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*?' 'Ain't seen it.' 'What are your views on *Citizen Kane*?' 'Ain't seen it.' 'What did you think of *Spartacus*?' 'Great fight scenes, not enough gore' . . . You know what I'm trying to say . . . the guy is really channelled into fantasy, escapism movies . . . he loves them, takes his kids along, he's more of a kid than his kids are . . . but to go and see something serious, I mean . . .

In the speculative scenario he voices here, he positions himself as competent to pose questions carrying a relatively legitimate, and almost 'high' cultural, reference. This implicit claim to knowledge is certainly significant but the implication Andy pursues is that he has grown up and his cousin John has not. Fixed within a single genre associated with childhood, 'more of a kid than his kids are', John, unlike Andy, could not be a competent respondent in the interview.

In another important respect, Andy also claims a position of special expertise in relation to film. Among friends, and to some extent among his family, he positions himself as a 'collector' able to provide for and inform others:

When I used to have the [videos] on display in my bedroom, people used to come round, it was like a video shop . . . I'm always out to purchase the obscure ones, the ones that people can't really get their hands on . . . *Last Temptation of Christ* is a controversial one . . . the only film that attracted a major interest in my relations in the sense of uncles and aunts, because of the whole thing that: (a) it was written by a Greek author; (b) it had blasphemous content. They all wanted out of pure curiosity to see it and it was constantly doing the rounds around uncles' houses, aunties' houses, and they'd give it back with disgust.

Again, the construction of the self is conducted here through anecdotes, or accounts of 'typical situations', in which he acts from an achieved position – he has produced himself as, in this case, the 'collector'. Without drawing upon formal, educational, discourses of legitimation, he generates a sense of his own social worth (Bourdieu, 1992) within the informal domain.



Although he has used ‘fantasy’ and ‘escapism’ as markers of immaturity, he also recalls genres vulnerable to comparable denigration in further securing his own position. In this case it is the longevity of experience, and the awareness of generic precursors, through which he constructs his maturity:

[B]eing of old school again, I’m into the classic side of horror, not that I don’t appreciate the new stuff . . . werewolves, *Frankenstein*, vampires, all that sort of stuff, looking at classic books . . . that’s what I’m really into. But slashers and all that stuff, I was there when it was invented with *Halloween*, you know, *Friday the 13th*, the original, all these films. I was there as a kid growing up with them, in the original days of the early slasher movies, I watch them now and it’s just right they will be constantly pounding at you, shock, shock. [When *Halloween* came out] I was there, [the] double bill *Halloween* and *Assault on Precinct 13*.

The repeated motif, ‘I was there’, is both a claim and a dismissal: what came before – ‘werewolves, *Frankenstein*, vampires’, the ‘old school’, the ‘classic side of horror’, ‘classic books’ – is implicitly more authentic, not least because it originates outside his own childhood and is not coincident with his own growth. It is again as a collector that he accumulates the older genres of horror as cultural capital.

With contemporary cinema too, he speaks of films in terms of their presence in his collection:

I’ll tell you where I tend to look for innovation and freshness, [in] Europe: I’m really into my French and Spanish films . . . Almodovar . . . I’ve got about six of his movies at home . . . interesting storylines, good film director, good story and they’re fresh . . . I mean I used to like Luc Besson before he went western, sold out to the Yanks, but if you get bored of what’s around, go and see other movies, European films. Yeah, they’ve got subtitles, but so what.

Here, Andy speaks from a position implicitly off-centre, outside the mainstream (Thornton, 1995), now extending his credibility through reference to films that are likely to be regarded as belonging to European art cinema. But even here his sense of ‘distinction’, and his construction of self-worth, is embedded within informal social networks. He does not project himself as an ‘individual’ oriented to attain credit in education, despite the difference that he invokes between himself and his cousin. Even collecting is not offered as an especially self-conscious and ordered activity but as originating in the dynamic of a particular friendship with a boy he knew at school:

Mark and me, we had our fascinations – he was the one who got me into the collecting thing of movies, film posters and books and music, you know . . .





He's the only one that I've really felt special with . . . he's like a soulmate . . . he was just a fascinating and interesting kid. If I had to say which guy at school was like a brother, I'd say it was him.

Andy's involvement with film is firmly embedded in the informal domain and in the negotiation of his identity there, among friends, family and the wider network of relatives. His knowledge is not constituted as systematic, explicit or as a matter for abstracted reflection (see Bernstein, 1996; Goodson, 1995).

## **Repositioning**

Commenting on how she felt about changes following her entry into higher education, Naomi remarked:

I did start to find it more difficult to relate to the people I work with. I know that sounds quite snobby, I'm not talking about the old people that I looked after but some of the staff I worked with. I found that our conversation was getting more and more poles apart . . . if I say something it tends to be dismissed in a sentence, you know, 'What you doing that for?' and then moving on to the next topic, I've never really had a chance to talk about it that much really . . . I did start once and I was told quite firmly that nobody knew what I was talking about . . . I think it was something to do with psychoanalytic theory. Somebody asked me some question, it's probably my weakest area anyway and I was trying to explain some sort of Freudian concept and, 'I don't know what you're talking about,' and I just sort of gave up. I was quite miserable about the fact that I obviously wasn't able to convey it well, in an interesting way.

Here she recovers the voice of a 'colleague', 'I don't know what you're talking about', to further position herself as 'other'. In her account, becoming familiar with academic film studies discourse is both regretted, to the extent that acquiring new ways of talking about films does not enable her to communicate more effectively with others, and embraced as tending to confirm her textual pleasures as somewhat solitary. But for Andy, because he has no investment in repositioning in the educational domain, the informal mode in which relations with others are sustained, and through which his own 'fascinations' have been formed, is not easily open to translation. Naomi's attempts to transpose academic discourse to her workplace meet the kind of rejection that Andy might present to anyone wanting to draw him into a film studies 'discussion'. For both Naomi and Andy, these tensions militate against – although they may not entirely eliminate – connections between the 'common-sense' experience of most of those who watch films and the academic discourses of film studies.



However, despite her very strong investment in academic study, Naomi did not attribute an especially distinctive conceptual power to theoretical discourse. Learning to speak, and to write, about films in the academic domain was not, in her account, to think in a significantly new way:

I was only saying last night after three years I don't think I've really learnt things that I didn't know before, I've just learnt the right words for them really. I've learnt theories and stuff around issues that I already knew that I really sort of knew I was kind of aware of.

Again, despite the reiterated theme of intellectual isolation, there is a refusal here to allow knowledge located in the middle-class world of the academy to appear as radically other to the knowledge of the working-class people with whom she also attempts to locate herself. As for Michael, the acquisition of a new language enables her to appear as what she always knew herself to be. And if, as a working-class person, she thinks like this then so, it seems, might others. Such a position thus sustains an optimism about education that is somewhat at odds with the difficulties she encountered in talking to colleagues at work. Some months after my interview with her, Naomi began training to become a secondary school teacher, and whatever her misgivings about her ability to communicate 'theory' to others, thus placed herself between academic and more common-sense domains, committed to work repeatedly at acts of translation between them (Richards, 1998a, 1998b).<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

All three of the respondents represented here are caught up in positioning themselves in relation to popular film and to academic discourses with respect to their informal social networks. The meanings given to 'knowledge' about film, to being able to speak about it, formally or otherwise, or to writing about it, are strongly anchored in matters of class and gender identity. Thus the educational project of film, media and cultural studies is not undermined but it is by no means straightforward in its appeal to 'non-traditional' students in higher education. Repositioning between 'popular' everyday discourses around film and more academic modes of discourse involves renegotiating their identities and their relationships with friends, family and companions at work. Andy, as a non-student, illustrates another means to achieve self-worth, contained within existing social and familial networks and largely hostile to the discourses of formal education. It seems ironic that someone with so much media experience places himself at such distance from the academic study of film. Of course, he acknowledges no regrets but, given the means to reflect on the constraints of his own gendered position, he too might begin to reverse his defensive retreat to a populist common-sense. But to draw Andy out would



depend on an engagement with his knowledge as it is embedded in his social networks. To seek, as a primary concern, to 'replace' it seems unlikely to be a successful strategy. More broadly then, there is a case here for a pedagogy that is attentive to the cultures of those who might otherwise be reluctant to become students at all (see Jones, 1997, 2002). Secondary schools have a long history of 'negotiation' with the informal cultural interests of students, not least because until relatively recently the great majority of working-class students were educated only in schools and did not progress to higher education. Thus, to conclude with the educational argument sketched in the introduction to this article, teaching about popular film and media in higher education now, with the widening of access to universities, might be most usefully informed by turning to accounts originating in school-based research. Such accounts offer substantial and detailed analyses of the difficulties, and the possibilities, of encounters between teachers and students in the field of media education (Bragg, 2000; Buckingham, 1990, 1998, 2003; Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1994; Buckingham et al., 1995; Richards, 1998a).

## **Appendix**

### **Investigating the experience of media studies students**

The data discussed in this article are taken from a small selection of focused life-history interviews conducted in 2000. The project, initiated during a semester's leave (supported by the Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Education at the University of North London), involved interviewing adult students in film studies (and closely related fields) and students taking GCSE A-level in Media Studies in schools. It is a qualitative study concerned with the detail and complexity of individual negotiations of educational experience and of popular media. Although I do not aspire to do 'depth psychology', I have been impressed by the approach to data analysis offered by Hollway and Jefferson (2000).

I do not teach film studies. My own work is located in education studies and is centred in teaching about 'youth', popular culture and media education. Access to the students consulted in this research was facilitated by their lecturers and their teachers. To preserve anonymity I cannot thank them by name, but I thank them nevertheless – both students and staff. I conducted interviews with those students who responded to my request for information about their experience of these subjects. The respondents were thus self-selected. Further interviews remain a possibility and I have kept in contact with several of these respondents over the past three years. Naomi and Michael (pseudonyms) were both taking film studies degrees and, like many of their fellow students, had re-entered education as 'mature' students after, and alongside, work in non-academic occupations. I was also interested in investigating the experience of those who, although intensely interested in film and other media, might see no



purpose in studying it formally. In order to explore this issue, and to develop the argument represented in this article, I conducted a lengthy interview with a hairdresser (Andy) in a cafe. The other interviews were conducted in more formal educational settings. This is a continuing project and the material here is presented to illustrate a larger body of data. Other papers, representing the school-based interviews, have been presented at the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, University of London Institute of Education (April 2002) and at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in Chicago (April 2003).

### Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented to the Media, Culture and Curriculum Special Interest Group at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 10 April 2001, Seattle, WA.

1. Bernstein has developed an elaborate argument around the concept of 'recontextualization'. I have not drawn explicitly on his work here but it has informed my enquiry in general terms (see Bernstein, 1996).
2. 'Interpretative repertoires are recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena. A repertoire . . . is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organised around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes)' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 149).
3. 'The "interiority" which so many feel compelled to diagnose is not that of a psychological system, but of a discontinuous surface, a kind of infolding of exteriority . . . The concept of the fold or the pleat suggests a way in which we might think of human being without postulating any essential interiority . . . The fold indicates a relation without an essential interior, one in which what is "inside" is merely an infolding of an exterior . . . we might think of the grasp that modes of subjectification have upon human beings in terms of such an infolding. Folds incorporate without totalizing, internalize without unifying, collect together discontinuously in the form of pleats making surfaces, spaces, flows and relations' (Rose, 1996: 143).
4. Three years on from these interviews, Michael is doing a PhD, Naomi is a schoolteacher and Andy is working as a hairdresser.

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