

The (a)sexual academic: University faculty in the movies from 1927-2014. (0174)

Pauline Reynolds

University of Redlands, USA

Academics or “learned men” have a long history in artifacts of popular culture ranging from the works of Chaucer and Rabelais in European literature to the TV and movie plots across the world in the twenty-first century (Sheppard, 1990). US movies particularly embraced professorial characters from the beginning of the cinematic medium with the production of the first movie to feature a fictional professor occurring in 1898 (Savada, 1995). From this first film university academics feature as stock characters in US movies. Over 1600 movies feature university academics as characters from the late 1800s to 2014¹. Indeed the presence of higher education and academics in movies is such that Hinton (1994) argues, “Movies...stand as a major part of higher education’s historical record, whether we like it or not” (pp. 142-143).

Despite such cinematic attention comparatively little research examines academics in movies (Conklin, 2008; Hinton, 1994; Umphlett, 1984). As academics symbolically and functionally represent the institutions and purpose of higher education, the analysis of their characters in movies provides one way to reveal dominant and alternative socio-cultural meanings (Polan, 1986) through a cinematic representative prism. Movies reflect, refract, reinforce, and challenge socio-cultural meanings, providing a site to uncover shared meanings through analysis (Barker, 2000; Ferro, 1998; Turner, 2006). Through analysis, the researcher reconstructs “non-visible zones in the past of societies” (Ferro, 1988, p. 20) revealing underlying, shared, and conflicting meanings. These meanings influence the values, beliefs, and behaviors of viewers, both simply and explicitly as well as more implicitly and complexly (e.g. Tucciarone, 2007; Reynolds, 2014; Wasylikiw & Currie, 2012).

In this study, examining university academics through the prismatic representative lens of the movies reveals shared and alternative meanings related to their role, purpose, and value. The long cinematic legacy of faculty suggests a persisting cultural relevancy for the role but exactly how that relevancy manifests has the potential to implicitly shape actual experiences, behaviors, and values related to faculty (Reynolds, 2014). In a past and current US cultural climate where the role, responsibilities, and value of professors is threatened through (mis)education, policy, and subsequent practices, this research offers one way to focus on academics and through analysis reveal constituent meanings related to their depictions, like a dispersive prism breaks light into the spectral colors of the rainbow.

Despite the ubiquitous presence of professors in movies, previous research in this area provides limited and contradictory examinations of Hollywood’s academics.

¹ This number was generated by a keyword search of three major movie databases: American Film Institute, imdb, and Film Index International.

Professors tend to be minimized in broader examinations of higher education in film (Conklin, 2008; Hinton, 1994; Reynolds, 2014; Umphlett, 1984). Other work generalizes faculty representation from small samples of movies, potentially reinforcing misrepresentations of academic life such as Dalton's (2007) analysis of teachers and teaching in movies. This work claims from 22 movies with academics over a seventy-year period that professors in the movies are "bad teachers" similar to the portrayal of school gym teachers who among other things engage in "sexual escapades and ridiculous hijinks" (p.62). However the academics that Dalton describes are the complete antithesis of those described by Reynolds (2007, 2009) where professorial sexual activity is completely omitted from a larger sample of movies analyzed from 1930-50.

This paper focuses on one emergent theme from a book-length manuscript examining the *reel* professoriate, the university academic in Hollywood movies from 1927- the present. For this presentation, I focus on the way that sex and sexuality is used as a way to *other* and/or transform the professorial characters in ways that negotiate trust and distrust in representation.

Methods

I generated a database of over 1500 movies ranging from 1927-2014, using a substantial purposive sample of movies from each decade featuring professors as main characters as the sample for this study. 1927 is the start date as this is the year *The Jazz Singer* was released and movies with sound truly arrived. Data for the analysis consists of transcriptions of the movies. Each movie is viewed twice, once to generate a transcript and again as a validity check. The data consists of transcribed dialogue as well as descriptions from the researcher about scene, setting, clothing, music, sounds, physical descriptions. I also engage in memoing throughout the data collection process noting thoughts and possible ideas related to the portrayal of the professors in and across the movie tests (Carspecken, 1996). I code the data using an emergent coding process with tools such as meaning fields and horizon analysis before determining relationships and patterns among the codes to form themes (Carspecken, 1996)².

Findings

Preliminary findings suggest a more complex portrayal of academic sexuality in the movies than Dalton's claim that cinematic professors generally engage in sexual escapades. Increasingly from 1927-2014, race, gender and sexuality influence narratives and academics' portrayals. In this analysis, academics are othered through their inability to engage in relationships, their retreat from relationships or through their callous pursuit of numerous encounters. My analysis traces an evolution in portrayal where professors transform from chaste, mostly white male professoriate, (approx. 1927-1950) to a later period (approx. 70s -90s) where male professors are almost predatory in their relationships (with students), and finally a post sexual period (approx. 2000's) where professors are widowed and need awakening again. Non-white male professors encounter differences with sex and sexuality in this evolution. For example, African-American male professors are characterized chastely into the 2000s, as even Eddie

Murphy's Buddy Love character in *The Nutty Professor* (1996 and 2000) needs a potion to pursue women.

This proposal provides just a glimpse of this work. Distinguishing representations of university academics through twentieth century US movies provides a map of (un)changing meanings related to the professoriate. Understanding these meanings through time helps comprehend the past as well as our present as institutions seek ways to bolster the relevance of academics' work against social forces.

References

- Barker, C. (2000). *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Carspecken, P. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research: a theoretical and practical guide*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Conklin, J.E. (2008). *Campus life in the movies: A critical survey from the silent era to the present*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company.
- Dalton, M.M. (2007). *The Hollywood curriculum: Teachers in the movies*. (revised ed.) New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Ferro, M. (1988). *Cinema and history*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press
- Hinton, D.B. (1994). *Celluloid ivy: Higher education in the movies 1960-1990*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press.
- Polan, D. (1986). *Power and paranoia: history, narrative, and the American cinema, 1940-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Reynolds, P. J. (2007). *The "reel" Professoriate: The portrayal of professors in American film, 1930--1950*. ProQuest.
- Reynolds, P. J. (2009). The celluloid ceiling: Women academics, social expectations, and narrative in 1940s American film. *Gender and Education*, 21(2), 209-224.

Reynolds, P. J. (2014). Representing “U”: Popular culture, media, and higher education.

ASHE Higher Education Report, 40(4), 1-145.

Savada, E. (Ed.). (1995). *The American Film Institute catalog of motion pictures produced*

in the United States: Film beginnings, 1893–1910. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Sheppard, R. (1990). From Narragonia to Elysium: Some preliminary reflections on the

fictional image of the academic. In D. Bevan (Ed.), *University fiction* (Vol. 5, pp. 11-

48). Atlanta, GA: Rodopi.

Tucciarone, K. M. (2007b). Community college image--By Hollywood. *Community*

College Enterprise 13(1), 37-53.

Turner, G. (2011). *Film as social practice*. Routledge.

Umphlett, W. L. (1984). *The movies go to college: Hollywood and the world of the*

college-life film. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Wasyliw, L., & Currie, M. (2012). The “Animal House” effect: How university-themed

comedy films affect students’ attitudes. *Social Psychology of Education: An*

International Journal, 15(1), 25-40.