

## Filmic figurations of the 'non-traditional' student: The pedagogical problems and possibilities of *Educating Rita*

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Films offer useful entry points into how the university and the university student may be understood within the social imagination. In this article, we explore the 1980s film *Educating Rita* (1983), which many commentators argue offers a groundbreaking portrayal of the 'non-traditional' higher education (HE) student. *Educating Rita*'s (1983) success, in part, arose from its novel depiction of an older working-class woman who transitions to study at an elite university. Despite the film being around 40 years old, it continues to contribute to popular understandings of HE and remains an enduring presence in classrooms around the world. Previous researchers have highlighted the film as a powerful pedagogical resource which can be used to orient non-traditional students to university life and different ways of being and acting as a university student. In this article, we critically investigate the pedagogical value of *Educating Rita* (1983), positioning it as a complex text which needs to be taught with great care. While previous readings have emphasised its empowering possibilities, we argue that *Educating Rita* (1983) also offers troubling representations which need to be thoughtfully considered. Arguably, the film's narrative turns on the stigmatisation of working-class family and culture, traditional notions that education leads to social mobility and ultimately 'escape'. It also reveals the university to be a fraught environment for an older, working-class woman. This paper offers implications for those exploring *Educating Rita* (1983) with non-traditional students, sharing critical issues to consider.

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## Introduction

Based on the 1980 stage play of the same name by Willy Russell which ran for three years in the West End, the film *Educating Rita* (1983) tells the story of a mature white working-class student and her aspiration to become 'educated' through participating in higher education (HE). Directed by Lewis Gilbert and starring Julie Walters (as Rita White) and Michael Caine (as Dr. Frank Bryant), the film became a major success when it was first released in 1983. The film adaptation of *Educating Rita* (1983) was nominated for three Academy Awards, and won other major awards including best film in the British Academy Film Awards and the Golden Globes for the performances of Walters and Caine. In the years since it opened in London, the play form of *Educating Rita* (1983) has remained popular, being performed almost continuously since it premiered (Midgley 2015). The film too has received considerable praise, featuring in lists such as the '100 best films of the century' as compiled by the British Film Institute in 1999 (BBC 1999). Indeed, as Mangan (2002: 19) argues, the play and film together have had 'a wide impact on contemporary cultural consciousness'. At the time of its initial release *Educating Rita* (1983) was path-breaking in its depiction of a working-class woman who successfully took up a place to study in an elite UK university context. While other more recent films which feature non-traditional HE students have also received attention, such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997) (see Koch and Dollarhide 2000) or *13 Semesters* (2009), *Wir Sind Die Neuen* [We Are the New Ones] (2014) and *Fuga de Cerebros* [Brain Drain] (2009) (see Lainio 2023), *Educating Rita* (1983) continues to circulate in formal educational spaces to this day. For example, the play is on the syllabus of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Key Stage 4 in the UK (Corley 2019) and the film adaptation is actively used in HE transition or bridging programmes to orient students to HE (Bennett et al. 2020).

In this paper, we extend recent HE scholarship (e.g., Lainio 2023) which argues that film and television texts are important forms of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux 2004), providing not only entertainment for viewers but also shaping popular notions about the 'idea of the university' (Henderson and Burford 2019) and imaginaries of the university student (Brooks and O'Shea 2021), particularly the non-traditional university student. In the film, Rita is clearly marked as a 'non-traditional' student on the basis of her social class, gender, age and life circumstances (Bennett et al. 2021). The term 'non-traditional student' can be applied differently in different contexts but it is generally understood as describing 'those students who are underrepresented in HE – and whose participation may be limited by structural factors' (Cotton et al. 2017). Given the significance of filmic representation, we contend that it is important to better understand how the 'non-traditional' HE student is constructed in such film

texts. Arguably, this task is even more necessary given the continued circulation of *Educating Rita* (1983) in the wider public sphere as well as in formal learning contexts designed to orient non-traditional students to HE. In this paper we ask: how is the non-traditional student figured in the representation of Rita? How does the film represent the development of Rita's academic personhood? And how is the university constructed in the text? In answering these questions, this paper offers a critical examination of the representations of the 'non-traditional student'. Across the discussion, we engage with existing critical analyses of the film and draw on practices of textual analysis (Kelly 2013) to outline the mixed possibilities *Educating Rita* (1983) offers for orienting non-traditional students to contemporary HE. While others have argued that *Educating Rita* (1983) remains a valuable pedagogical tool (Bennett et al. 2020) that can allow students access to cultural codes and language surrounding 'what to expect from university and how to behave' (Rutten 2011: 5), we argue the representations of the university, academics and non-traditional students in *Educating Rita* (1983) also offer troubling accounts of HE for non-traditional student audiences. Despite it being a groundbreaking text, considerable care is required when using *Educating Rita* (1983) in contemporary educational settings, as we will illustrate.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. In the next section, we outline our conceptual framework, introducing the idea of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux 2004; Lainio 2023). Following this, we offer an analytic reading of *Educating Rita* (1983) drawing on practices of textual analysis (Kelly 2013). In our discussion, we attend to the narrative constructions of the non-traditional university student, the university academic and to the idea of the university in this text. We then move to consider with reference to the work of Rutten (2011) whether *Educating Rita* (1983) can be understood as a text that provides 'equipment for living' for non-traditional students. The last part of the article, seeks to extend from previous critical analyses relating to gender and power drawn from theatrical productions of the text (Corley, 2019), to argue that the story of *Educating Rita* (1983) conforms with, and is based on, familiar notions of HE as a vehicle for social mobility which allows individuals to 'escape' their working-class origins. This escape relies on a duality between the haves and the have-nots, and where in this binary, the working-class world that a 'non-traditional' student originates from is stigmatised or othered.

### **Film texts as public pedagogy**

The concept of *public pedagogy* is central to our thinking in this paper, as it has been for a host of education studies researchers (Lainio 2023; Crowely and Rasmussen 2010) seeking to understand the social and subjective impacts of popular culture, amid a wider

‘spectrum of social practices and settings’ (Giroux 2004: 61). Henry Giroux, the leading proponent of this concept, argues that it is important to develop understandings of how ‘culture deploys power and is shaped and organized within diverse systems of representation, production, consumption and distribution’ (Giroux 2004: 59). He is particularly interested in expanding commonsense notions of where learning is thought to occur, arguing that popular culture shapes the politics of representation, and is therefore a key pedagogical site for the (re)production of social meanings. This kind of thinking is evident in the work of Pauline Reynolds, in particular her book *Representing “U”: Popular Culture Media and Higher Education* (2014). Reynolds (2014: 1) argues that ‘films, TV, best-selling novels, and other media are not merely entertainment but texts that teach viewers about things they are not familiar with, lead viewers to expect certain experiences in particular situations, and suggest ways to behave’. As Reynolds (2014: 2) notes, because the university is present across so much popular culture, ‘learning about the messages attributed to higher education in media is an important undertaking for those who work in or research about higher education’. While viewers’ engagement with popular culture may not be sought in order to learn about HE in an intentional way, it may nonetheless unconsciously influence viewers’ ideas of university life, thus becoming ‘a vital and clandestine influence upon the negotiation of continuing discourse and action regarding higher education’ (Reynolds 2014: 3).

Working with and against Giroux’s (2004) conceptualisation, Crowley and Rasmussen (2010: 24) further describe public pedagogy as ‘thinking about how subjective change comes about through interactions with popular culture’. For Crowley and Rasmussen (2010: 24), such change may occur ‘in those engaged as viewers, or in those who dialogue with one another’, for example, on fora which facilitate interaction about popular texts. Yet the authors go on to argue that change may also occur in classrooms ‘where the programme might be discussed in a manner which is pedagogical in a more traditional sense’ (Crowley and Rasmussen 2010: 24). Key to the argument of Crowley and Rasmussen (2010) is that the link between social change and viewing cultural texts ought not be rendered overly simple; the authors highlight the unpredictability and messiness of all pedagogical relations. Indeed, as Lainio (2023) notes such texts can lead to both reproduction and resistance/contestation of prevailing social discourses.

Building on these educational debates, in this paper we aim to explore how *Educating Rita* (1983) constructs the subject position of the ‘non-traditional student’, her academic personhood and how the film represents the university as a social institution. In so doing, we hope to stretch out and extend some existing conversations about the pedagogical potentials and pitfalls involved in engaging non-traditional students with this complex text.

## Our study

As noted earlier, in this paper we are interested in what happens when we consider the film version of *Educating Rita* (1983) as a form of public pedagogy. Perhaps our interest in a vintage film, which is by now four decades old, requires some explanation. Our interest in *Educating Rita* (1983) began when Mitchell was undertaking her doctoral research on the narratives of first-generation students in doctoral education (Mitchell 2014; Mitchell 2019). Through her empirical work, Mitchell became interested in how messages carried by film and television texts contribute to individuals' understandings of the university, particularly for those who may not have first-hand experience, as is the case with many first-generation<sup>1</sup> university students (Mitchell included). She also became interested in how early representations of particular kinds of educational subjects develop authoritative narratives, which impact on the stories which follow them. Mitchell was particularly interested in how the archetype of the 'non-traditional student' was developed in *Educating Rita* (1983), with an understanding that this early and highly popular representation possibly had greater cultural and social influence on stories of non-traditional students that have followed in its wake.

From this beginning point, we embarked on our study using textual analysis as our primary method. Drawn from literary studies, textual analysis is underscored by a deeply critical approach to language (Kelly 2013). Gallop (2007: 183) has described textual analysis or close reading as involving 'enhanced, intensified reading' which can be valuable in revealing assumptions implicit within text, showing 'that meaning is produced within (and for) particular ideologies' (Kelly 2017: 72). In order to undertake a close reading of *Educating Rita* (1983) we drew on the steps outlined in Kelly's (2013) work:

- Looking for concepts in the text that were not easy to define or were problematic
- Paying attention to imagery and metaphor within the text (what kinds of metaphor were at play in the text, were they unusual or common, and what were their effects?)
- Noticing gaps or silences within the text or, as Kelly (2013: 72) asks, "what isn't said?"
- Noticing repetition – what terms were repeated in the text and what was the effect?
- Asking what relationships existed between the text and other texts (were there other texts referenced or evoked in the chosen text?)

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'first-generation student' can be applied to individuals who are members of the first-generation of a family to attend university. This descriptor is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'first-in-family' to describe the same group of students.

- Identifying the purpose of the text and the intended audience
- Paying attention to form, e.g. noticing how particular scenes are constructed, the mise en scene (visual setting) and film shots

Interrogating *Educating Rita* (1983) using this analytic frame involved both authors watching and re-watching the text to identify key elements of the cultural narratives that were important for this study. Kelly (2013) points to the importance of enriching this approach to close reading by employing other critical lenses. With this in mind, a further part of our analysis involved focusing on the context of the production of the text (Kelly 2013), attending to ways (academic) identities were formed and represented within a text and to the overall shape of the narrative. In the case of *Educating Rita* (1983), for instance, neoliberal ideology under the political leadership of Margaret Thatcher was becoming dominant in the UK, and within this frame university education is largely focused on HE for vocational purposes, in other terms, for the training of human capital for the future workforce (Marginson 2017). And yet this is not at all apparent in the film, with Rita's goals for the university revolving around her desire for intellectual development and in 'finding herself'. Lastly, there was specific attention paid to the way power functions within the narrative setting of the text, for example when analysing *Educating Rita* (1983), we were interested in the relations between the characters, particularly Rita and Frank, and how this was shown within the film.

### **A close reading of *Educating Rita***

In the paragraphs which follow we critically analyse the text, paying attention to the ways in which the characters are portrayed and developed, with a particular focus on the development of Rita's academic personhood, the 'idea of the university' and the representation of the university academic. This will be followed by a broader discussion.

#### ***Meeting Rita: Meeting Frank***

The film tells the story of Rita, a 26-year-old hairdresser from Liverpool who is determined to gain a university education. Rita enrolls in an English literature course as part of an Open University programme where she meets Dr Frank Bryant. The story is told in comedic form and focuses on Rita and Frank's pedagogical and personal relationship (Bramman 2009) as Rita undertakes her higher learning journey as a non-traditional student. In the end, Rita achieves her goal of gaining a university education and is shown to have new confidence and greater opportunities ahead of her (including the possibilities of travel, a job in London or more study at the end of film). A significant

aspect of the narrative power of *Educating Rita*<sup>2</sup> (1983) arises from Rita's self-development and through the filmic text's inspirational message, that is, individuals can achieve their goals and improve their lives no matter what their circumstances are or where they come from. As the playwright of *Educating Rita*, Willy Russell states, 'the desire to improve one's lot is a primal human force. Rita's aspiration touched a nerve because it represents the universal struggle to get something better' (as cited in, Midgley 2015: para. 7).

We are introduced to Frank in the very first scenes of the film, as we see him cross campus at a steady pace, past old stone buildings and tidily laid out lawns populated by students. His pace and demeanour signal his assurance in this setting. Frank's journey across the university grounds is accompanied by the resonant sounds of classical music. Dr Frank Bryant, as we come to know him, is depicted as a serious faced, middle aged, white man. He appears in a white shirt, brown blazer and jeans and carries a leather satchel no doubt filled with a range of reading materials as would be fitting for his work as a scholar. When he reaches his destination, his office, we see Frank approach his bookshelves and trace his fingers along one row of his many books. However, instead of looking for reading material to begin his academic work, we find Frank searching for a secreted bottle of whiskey, ironically hidden behind Charles Jackson's novel *The Lost Weekend* (a story about a writer who struggles with alcoholism).

As we discover next, Rita traverses the university campus in a far less confident manner. She walks at an uneven speed and stops hesitantly as she asks for directions to find her way. Accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of classical music in the background, we hear the noise of Rita's heels clickety-clacking on the pavement beneath her. Her uncertain walk across the university lets the audience know that she is a newcomer to this place; she is an outsider. Once at Frank's office, viewers then see Rita frowning as she hears a group of students descending from the stairs above her laughing about the perceived ignorance of a classmate who does not understand what the term 'assonance' means. Rita, seemingly deflated by their words, does not know what this literary term means (as we come to understand later) and slowly walks up to Frank's room. Once at Frank's door, the narrative reaches an important symbolic moment; Rita knocks and then attempts to open the door, but it does not shift. Frank politely invites her in and then when she does not enter, shouts at her, 'for God's sake come in'. Rita has to push at the door with all her weight for it to open. In this way, Rita's difficulty with crossing the threshold of Frank's office symbolically reflects her struggle to gain access to the university.

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<sup>2</sup> We recognise there are many commonalities between the play and filmic form of *Educating Rita* including that Willy Russell wrote the screenplay for the film as well as the play form. However, the discussion across this article concentrates on *Educating Rita*'s (1983) cinematic form.

However, instead of being forlorn from her recent encounters, Rita is sharp and funny and immediately informs Frank about what he needs to do:

Rita: I'm coming in aren't I? It's that stupid bleedin' handle on the door. You wanna get that fixed!

Frank: Erm – yes, I suppose I always mean to ...

Rita: Well that's no good always meanin' to, is it? Y' should get on with it; one of these days you'll be shoutin 'Come in' an it'll go on forever because the poor sod on the other side won't be able to get in. An you won't be able to get out.

Rita's dramatic entry into Frank's office signals the start of the narrative proper.

Rita, in this initial encounter, is chatty, funny and dynamic. She appears to be excited and nervous, expressing her aspiration to learn about herself through gaining an education. Frank, however, seems to be somewhat less than enthused about her educational dreams. As we come to learn, he fears she will become like everyone else in his dreary academic world, devoid of life and vibrancy. As Bramman (2009: para. 11) points out, 'in Frank's mind, education and culture are not expressions of a higher or deeper wisdom anymore, but pretentious exercises in futility'. Indeed, as Frank says to another character, just before meeting Rita, 'why a grown adult wants to come to this place after putting in a day's hard work is totally beyond me'. Herein lies the comical paradox of *Educating Rita* (1983) in that Rita desires precisely that which Frank no longer values (Bramman 2009).

The narrative then centres on the tutor-student dyad relation between the two protagonists. Frank, as a senior academic, introduces Rita to scholarly texts and well-known authors. He establishes a clear divide between what can be regarded as 'literature' and high culture and what should be seen as its poorer cousin, the 'lowly' texts from popular culture. We see Frank chastise Rita during their tutorial sessions about her taste in books. Frank tells her directly that 'devouring pulp fiction is not being well-read'. Those who read 'lowly' popular texts, like Rita's working-class community, are essentially presented as being 'ignorant and cheap or tacky' (Fisher et al. 2008). Rita initially finds it difficult to understand the course literary texts and the language within them, so she struggles with whether she really belongs at university. In this sense, *Educating Rita* (1983) can be understood as a fictional literacy narrative that tells the story of a learner who despite difficulties meets the challenges of moving from one discourse community to another (Rutten 2011). Although the film reveals this middle-class university world has flaws, or at least, the people within it do – Frank is a cynical drunk and Trish, her high culture-loving flatmate is deeply troubled; yet their lives are not a source of mockery or humour in the way Rita's working-class origins are.

### ***Rita's academic personhood***

Rita is a compelling character. She is funny, courageous and determined. Although she has only limited formal education and is unfamiliar with HE at the outset of the story, she is presented in the narrative as bright and capable. Rita is also keen to learn and is eager to pursue 'a life of the mind', something she sees as a key avenue to self-discovery. As she tells Frank, 'See, I want to discover meself first. Do you understand that?'. Notably, the kind of knowledge she pursues is particularly associated with middle-class tastes and high culture. Rita, in this way, can be seen through her educational efforts as seeking a particular kind of personhood, one that is more sophisticated and 'cultured'. It is a personhood that is also undoubtedly classed. Indeed, one feature of the narrative of *Educating Rita* (1983) is that going to university seems to be as much about attaining a particular lifestyle as gaining an education (Fisher et al. 2008), albeit with little attention to issues of work or career. In this sense, we watch Rita work hard to adopt the dispositions of a traditional student, which may be thought about in a Bourdieusian sense<sup>3</sup> as the pursuit of a middle-class habitus.

A notable omission from the narrative is the absence of economic pressures or motivations shaping Rita's pursuit of HE – forces so often present for students from working-class backgrounds. Research that focuses on the experiences of first-generation students suggests economic concerns are often important to them and can significantly influence their HE pathways (see Mitchell 2019). Indeed, Fisher and colleagues (2008: 151) suggest, the 'portrayal of adult learning ignores the extrinsic goals that motivate many adult students. Limited economic prospects often drive adults to education'. *Educating Rita's* (1983) silence here is somewhat striking, given the timing of the film, in the early 1980s. A period marked by the rise of neoliberal ideology, Margaret Thatcher's political ascendancy and with regard to education, an increasing emphasis on vocational education and efficiency (Fisher et al. 2008). Despite these political factors, Rita undertakes higher education with the undeniably powerful, but seemingly singular goal, to 'find herself'. Importantly, this aspiration was arguably somewhat more conceivable at a time, in the early 1980s, when university attendance was typically free in contrast to the present. However, for contemporary audiences, especially in the context of the realities of modern HE where participation

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bourdieu (1990) habitus can be understood as a system of dispositions that inform "thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions" (p. 55). These perceptions, thoughts and actions manifest through different ways "of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 93–94). Lee and Kramer (2013) also explain that an individual internalises their social position "into their tastes and world view" (pp. 18–19), which then can further contribute to their position in their social setting.

typically comes at significant financial cost, the absence of economic motivations for higher study may be difficult to relate to.

Another of the film's issues that warrants consideration relates to the depiction of Rita's working-class family as a barrier to her success. Her family and especially her husband are shown to be extremely unsupportive of her decision to study at university. Rita's father, for example, castigates her for not having given him grandchildren. Rita's husband, Denny, also has strong ideas about the traditional responsibilities of a wife and sets out to obstruct Rita's academic studies. Indeed, Denny goes so far as burning her study books and destroying her written work. In the end, Denny requires her to either give up being at university or leave their shared home and marriage. Despite these circumstances, she decides to continue her education, but it takes all of her determination to do so, and she forsakes many elements of her life to continue her studies. Whilst there can be significant challenges for those first-generation students whose families do not have prior experience of higher education to draw upon, the representation of the family-higher education dynamic for Rita is one dimensional and contrasts with previous research on the experiences of first-generation students. This research recognises a much more nuanced picture which often describes the multiple ways family members provide ongoing encouragement, moral and financial support where possible, to enable them to go to university and undertake higher study (Mitchell 2019). As Corley (2019: 24) neatly sums up, the plot offers a fairly linear trajectory for Rita, one where higher education involves both a break from her working-class life and her family to achieve a new kind of independence: 'over the course of a year, with Frank's support, Rita's education leads her to question her working-class life. She leaves her husband, travels and decides to step into an unknown future of, for the first time, her own choosing'.

Rita's educational journey conforms with traditional notions of social mobility and the benefits of a university education. HE in *Educating Rita* (1983) is shown to give individuals a chance to improve themselves as Rita is seen to have overcome her limited life circumstances but this necessarily involved her rejecting many aspects of her former (working-class) life and taking on a new kind of personhood. As other scholars have identified, 'previous research alerts us to how questions of HE and social mobility can quickly become conflated with a project of how to become middle-class' (Bathmaker et al. 2016: 16). Although Rita does recognise the need to question some parts of her new life at the very end of the story, the film overall presents HE as a means to transform yourself and to escape, albeit with some sacrifice. This view of social mobility has been problematised in HE literature, with scholars arguing for different and broader conceptions of social mobility beyond escape. Indeed, Loveday (2015) argues social

mobility might better be conceptualised in terms of ‘fugitivity’ rather than ‘escape’: where working-class or non-traditional students participation in HE might be better understood in terms of the motivation to seek refuge from inequality and not through a disidentification with working-class culture, traditions or origins.

### ***The university in Educating Rita***

The university in the first scenes of *Educating Rita* (1983) is generously showcased. Viewers accompany Frank as he walks across campus, through arched corridors and past grand stone buildings and well laid out lawns. Students occupy the campus grounds; sitting together in groups under the warm skies or casually lining the walkways with their books and bicycles. The familiar iconography of an old world university continues to be recycled across the film. Indeed, as Fisher et al. (2008: 166) maintain, ‘everything connected with the northern provincial red brick university Rita visits is presented to connote privilege and culture’. Although the film was set in Liverpool, the film was shot in Ireland and it is interesting to note that the filmmakers chose Trinity College in Dublin to capture the outside university scenes (Rutten 2011). Trinity College is one of the oldest universities in Europe (est. 1592) with an august lineage in terms of its plans being significantly influenced by the designs of Oxford and Cambridge Universities (Trinity College Dublin 2014). This choice of Trinity College as the university setting in *Educating Rita* (1983) is another factor within the filmic narrative which contributes towards re-inscribing and re-articulating one of the central imaginaries of the university, that is, the university as an elite place or ‘ivory tower’.

### ***The academic in Educating Rita***

Across the narrative, the audience is given a clear impression of the class and status of Frank as a senior academic. We initially see Frank only briefly in a classroom setting, and despite appearing bored, and being dismissive and somewhat drunk, his students only politely express their concerns. His position and authority are also made plain in an early exchange between Frank and Rita, in response to Rita’s question about how he is usually addressed by students, Frank curtly replies, ‘Sir’, although he quickly goes on to tell her to call him Frank as she is a student with the Open University.<sup>4</sup> This tutorial setting of Frank’s office further communicates the privileged position of university academics. His office is well-proportioned, has high ceilings and large windows that

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<sup>4</sup> The Open University was established by Royal Charter in 1969. With over 200,000 students currently, it is one of the largest HE institutions in Europe. The majority of Open University learners study primarily off-campus (Open University 2024).

provide generous views that overlook pleasant green spaces. The walls of his office are lined by large paintings and overflowing wooden bookshelves. The large office space possesses old leather furniture, a fireplace and a large desk. The items within Frank's office are an essential element of the *mise en scene* and represent upper-middle-class taste and wealth (Fisher et al. 2008). As Fisher and colleagues (2008: 166) observe, Frank's rather grand working space is 'entirely unrepresentative of the facilities accorded to most university staff', but its presentation works to confirm the elevated status of the university academic. In the tutorial scenes, and aided by the setting, Frank is represented as a holder of legitimate knowledge rejecting popular culture. He is shown to occupy a superior position to Rita in spite of his bad behaviour whilst Rita struggles with gaining access to academic discourses. This binary of legitimate knowledge holder or expert vs unknowing novice can be seen as fitting with traditional gender stereotypes. Mangan (2002: 20) argues, '*Educating Rita* stages a world in which it is taken more or less for granted that hegemonic social and cultural authority is most naturally vested in a male figure; and while [...] Willy Russell subjects this social and cultural authority to a good deal of good-natured ribbing, he leaves these values fairly intact'. Mangan (2002: 24) also maintains that the dynamic that exists between the younger woman and the older authoritative man within the story is 'blatantly patriarchal'. Nonetheless, as the narrative evolves Rita, to an extent, does challenge Frank's patriarchal power.

### **Discussion: Does *Educating Rita* offer 'equipment for living' for non-traditional students?**

Those who identify *Educating Rita* (1983) as a beneficial pedagogical text often highlight important strengths of the narrative. Undoubtedly, the film does draw attention to the significance of the efforts to widen participation in HE through showing that Rita ultimately deserved an education and rightfully belonged in HE. Moreover, the film's depiction of Rita as a first-in-family, non-traditional student is one that is in many ways positive, highly agentic and she is shown to deserve a chance. Indeed, the film's depiction of Rita can be read as helpfully orienting other non-traditional students to higher education through alerting potential non-traditional learners to some of the key challenges they might face (ie lack of familiarity with academic culture, language and codes). Rita's successful HE journey suggests that despite the challenges they face they can ultimately succeed and achieve their dreams. Although the university is initially a foreign place to Rita, she is not shown to be weak or submissive. As Zaniello (2003: 131) notes, 'Rita wants more, and she forces the system to deliver it'. However, as we will discuss, balance is required here in order to hold both the potentials and problematic portrayals we read into the text.

Rutten (2011, para. 7) for example, describes *Educating Rita* (1983) as an ‘exemplary literacy narrative’ as it offers, in his view, HE students ‘equipment for living’ through its exploration of Rita’s struggle to develop her academic literacy and succeed in her studies. Rutten (2011) primarily utilises the work of theorist Kenneth Burke, who, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1967) identified how literature provides a specific kind of ‘naming’ that can chart certain situations. Rutten (2011) in his study of *Educating Rita* (1983) drew on Burke’s literary analysis to identify whether and how the filmic narrative provided ‘equipment for living’ for thinking about their HE experiences within the university classroom. Rutten (2011: 8) argued that the students were able to reflect on their experiences through viewing the film and were able ‘to identify with the particular discourse community they are engaging with’. He also pointed to the ways ‘some students reflected on the power of fiction to frame what to expect from the university and how to behave’ (Rutten 2011: 5).

Although Rutten (2011) contributes some useful insights about the value of *Educating Rita* (1983) as a text that offers ‘equipment for living’ for HE students to engage within a classroom setting, we would like to offer some further facets to this analysis. Indeed, it is necessary to recognise how HE popular culture texts can also potentially operate to mislead or misinform. Gregory (2007: 8) asserts that education narratives ‘that swirl thickly in most cultures, especially western culture [...] haunt real classrooms like ghosts and invisibly distort’. In contrast with Rutten (2011), Gregory believes that these narratives create notions that ‘effectively work against education’ (Gregory 2007: 8). Indeed, filmic texts can rely on outdated university images and employ stereotypical images and that can hinder rather than aid students through HE. Arguably, the concept of the working-class student undertaking HE for what appears to be an almost sole purpose, does not reflect the diverse goals many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have for HE. Moreover, the images of academics as privileged, well-off, white men does very little to speak to the growing diversity of university academics (Finkelstein 2010), the commitment many teaching staff have to their students’ learning (Anderson et al. 2020), the realities of academics’ conditions of work (Sparkes 2007) or the rewards associated with academic work. All of these aspects of the filmic narrative of *Educating Rita* (1983) can be identified as providing limited insights into the world of the university of the present.

It is possible to point to the film’s age as a way to account for some of the outdated representations or stereotypical imagery it showcases. However, as Fisher and colleagues note (2008: 148), ‘even in 1983, it presented a picture of HE, adult learners, particularly women, learners and working-class life that bore little resemblance to contemporary experience’. Instead, perhaps, a better account for the elevated notion of

the university presented in this filmic narrative comes from an invocation of the ‘ivory tower’ imaginary of the university. This university, as an elite ‘ivory tower’ space, is regularly cited and recycled in discourse in different ways to this day. This film, some forty years old, remains significant as an example of how ‘its clichéd view of higher education and the adult learner is still prevalent, despite the widespread experience of the reality of university life’ (Fisher et al. 2008: 148).

Equally, the gender politics of the text require careful consideration. As critics have noted, the text is a variation on the Pygmalion and Galatea myth, recounted in Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This myth tells the story of the sculptor Pygmalion and a statue of a woman that he longs to bring to life. As Corley (2019: 32) notes, while 1980s theatre audiences were ‘primed to view it through the lens of its performance tradition: the Pygmalion/Galatea myth, yet another story of a man refashioning a woman in his image’. However, contemporary viewers are likely to interpret the text differently in the wake of decades of feminist organising, including the Me Too movement<sup>5</sup> and its global efforts to end sexual harassment and assault (Collier Hillstrom 2018). As Corley (2019: 32) argues, ‘an audience today is likely to reframe the story, taking note of the quasi-abusive methods used by Frank to shape Rita, or more significantly, the way that Rita, by refusing Frank’s attempts to sculpt her, interrupts a pedagogy based on patriarchal notions of the unformed woman [...] it is no longer possible to see Frank’s mentorship of Rita as benign’.

These threads of gender analysis are taken up in another study by Bennett and colleagues (2021), who explore how they used the text of *Educating Rita* (1983) with a group of eight Australian Aboriginal women who completed an Indigenous-only bridging course. Bennett and colleagues (2021: 84) explain that they used the film text as a catalyst for yarning circle discussions ‘about the strengths, obstacles, and enablers the women experienced whilst studying’. Furthermore, they describe a pedagogical scene where ‘the film is positioned as a strengths-based narrative about pursuing educational goals, in spite of limiting stereotypes’ (2021: 85), arguing that such a ‘story of resilience and self-determination and the omission of direct reference to Aboriginality in the narrative allows students’ scope to position their cultural identity as a strength, instead of defaulting to deficit discourses about Indigenous people and education’ (85). Bennett and colleagues (2021) outline how the so-called ‘Educating Rita Syndrome’ (whereby non-traditional women students returning to study experience relationship

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<sup>5</sup> The Me Too movement has had a wide impact on contemporary culture around the world. A critical factor that contributed to the impact of the movement was activists extensive use of social media using the the hashtag #MeToo. As Collier Hillstrom suggests, by posting the words ‘Me Too’, on social media, “millions of women established a community of survivors and launched a social change movement” (2018: 1).

breakdowns with their heterosexual partners) is taken up in discussions. Although importantly, Bennett and colleagues (2021) note that the Eurocentric nature of the film means that some women do not see themselves in this kind of representation.

## Conclusion

*Educating Rita* (1983) is one of the earliest and most celebrated mainstream films about a working-class woman who goes to university as a 'mature' student. The film at its time was groundbreaking in its representation of a non-elite educational subject participating in an elite university setting. Given the continued relevance of this filmic text in contemporary culture and within specific learning contexts, we have explored the pedagogical value of *Educating Rita* (1983) through employing textual analysis (Kelly 2013) to critically examine the possibilities and problems associated with this notable production. In our discussion of *Educating Rita* (1983) we recognise the significance of the narrative in establishing the rightful place of 'non-traditional' students like Rita within the university. We also draw on some earlier research which identifies the ways *Educating Rita* (1983) functions as an 'exemplary literacy text' (Rutten 2011). Specifically, we highlight Rutten's work (2011) which argued that *Educating Rita* (1983) helped students frame their understandings of the university through access to the relevant cultural codes and language of HE.

However, alongside these strengths we identify a number of critical issues that emerge from *Educating Rita*'s (1983) filmic text. Rita is depicted as needing to change almost every aspect of her life to pursue higher education. In essence, she has to break with those from her working-class world to assume her place within the university. She separates from her husband, leaves her home and takes a new job. Moreover, her parents are shown as being uninterested in her academic studies and instead her father pressures her to continue on the more traditional path to motherhood to provide him with grandchildren. In a sense, the film identifies Rita as needing to 'escape' from the restrictions of her former life, where she has come from, to gain a university education. This is not easy for Rita but it appears to be necessary for her growth and development. Thus, the story of *Educating Rita* (1983) positions working-class students as needing to escape their origins and separate themselves from those around them to have better lives. In this way, this filmic text conforms to traditional conceptions of social mobility, which rely on the notion of escape and a kind of stigmatisation of the working-class world from which a 'non-traditional' student typically comes from.

Moreover, the university of *Educating Rita* (1983) is inhabited by seemingly very privileged individuals who pursue their academic studies (often with reluctance in

the case of Frank) in typically elegant and old-world spaces. As we noted, viewers are at the outset of the film transported into the university in *Education Rita* (1983) through the images of Trinity College, one of the oldest European universities in existence. In combination, through its use of imagery, characterisation and narrative, *Educating Rita* (1983) can be seen as both disrupting and re-inscribing long-standing conceptualisations of the university. Contrary to some earlier discussions which emphasise the pedagogical value of the film, we instead position *Educating Rita* (1983) as a complex text with mixed possibilities for orienting students to contemporary HE. For the reasons outlined across this paper we advocate for careful and critical pedagogical engagement with *Educating Rita* (1983) from educators within the classroom setting.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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