OPEN SCREENS

Calver, K and Michael-Fox, B 2025 Introduction to the Special Issue *Students on Screen*. *Open Screens*, 7(2): pp. 1–17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/os.24502

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# Introduction to the Special Issue *Students on Screen*

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This is an introduction to the Special Issue Students on Screen, giving an overview of the issue and background on key literature relating to representations of students on screen.

## Representations of Students on Screen

Any reader of *Open Screens* is likely to need little convincing of the importance screen cultures play in society. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), when writing as an educator about the power of literature, emphasised how cultural representations function as windows into others' lives and other worlds but also as mirrors – as a means of affirmation and identity formation, reflecting back experiences and offering a means to explore one's own individual sense of belonging. Bishop's (1990) work has informed many of the debates about representation explored in this issue. The term 'students' may conjure ideas and images informed by personal experience, but also by media representations of all kinds. When considering what these representations 'do', many questions arise: what can screen representations tell us about what it means to be a student? What experiences might students encounter and in what contexts? What does a student *look* like? What can representations of students tell us about a specific society and its central tenets and concerns? What students are represented, and who lacks representation? Many of the articles in this issue provide insight into several of these questions at once, helping to critically examine the construction of the student on screen. This introduction will provide a brief overview of some of the concepts and ideas about students on screen already in existence within academic publishing, before providing an overview of the *Students on Screen* project from which it stems. Finally, it will provide a summary of the issue to help you navigate it.

Readman (2016) has pointed out that whilst many films and TV programs include the representation of educational settings, students, teachers and learning, they have also tended to place their focus on the educator, rather than on the student. This is perhaps representative of power dynamics in social contexts where the teacher is positioned as the 'giver' of knowledge and the student the 'receiver'. Teachers tend to be adults and students tend to be children, reflecting broader biases around age and media representations that have been widely explored in recent years (for example, Bielby and Bardo 2014). As Readman (2016: 1) also argues, representations of education often 'speak to common, or comparable experiences that the audience will have shared' and consequently they 'are richly imbued with narrative potential in their evocations of power, status, discipline, knowing, discovery, and desire'. This can be seen in how, when students are the focus of screen representations, they are usually a specific 'type' of student – often younger, typically either highly privileged in representations of private schooling or notably under-privileged in representations that emphasise the teacher as 'saviour'. Mature students are, overall, underrepresented in popular cultural representations altogether (Calver and Michael-Fox 2021a), reflecting the broader issue of representation of older people on screen.

Media representations can produce 'patterns of images and repetitive stable ideologies that are practically unavoidable' (García-Castro and Pérez-Sánchez 2018: 2). Consequently, they can frame, inform, and offer complex and sometimes competing messages about what it might mean to be a student both now and in the past. Certainly, many different ideas about student identities circulate in screen cultures, which can both convey and inform cultural assumptions (Fisher and Cottingham 2016; Calver and Michael-Fox 2021b). For example, Jayadeva et al. (2021: 2) have pointed out that 'a common construction, within Anglophone nations of the Global North, in particular, is student as hedonist or party-goer'. This is true especially of university students, but also secondary or high-school aged students. Yet Ingram and Allen (2018: 196) note that students are also often seen as 'overly-sensitive and too easily "triggered"', lacking in grit and resilience. This shows how representations can also be somewhat contradictory, with the idea of the hedonistic party-goer sitting uncomfortably at times alongside that of the so-called 'snowflake'. Neither are representative of the many students whose experience of study is characterised by hard work (either or both as a student and simultaneously in employment). Williams (2010: 170) has emphasised that media representations of students should be analysed because they 'reflect back to society some of the dominant ways in which what it means to be a student is understood'. This issue engages with a range of dominant ways, as well as some less overt ones, that students are seen in different societies. The differing social contexts in which students operate, and the dominance of Anglophone and US and UK-based representations are particularly relevant here, and those who engage with this issue will find similarities and differences between the representations and contexts discussed in the range of articles here and their own experiences of education. Differences, for example, between whether students (or their parents) pay for secondary or Higher Education, in the roles of school and university structures, staff titles in educational contexts (eg. the complex systems of titles and promotions in universities). Consequently, many of the texts examined in this issue offer windows into educational contexts as much as they do into representations of students.

Scully and Harmes (2023: 2) have argued that popular cultural representations of students and Higher Education institutions may carry 'more weight in public and policy discourse than experience or knowledge of reality' – perhaps in particular as university is something that, despite the massification of higher education, many do not have the opportunity to experience firsthand. They point out that:

> 'it is from popular culture that students and academics gain their primary knowledge of how to *be* students and academics, and they then perform these roles

> accordingly in the real world, either consciously or unconsciously' (Scully and Harmes 2023: 9).

Yet, as we have argued elsewhere, whilst popular culture can mediate academic contexts, they can 'also act as a form of critique, contributing to the cultural production of critical knowledge about the university, its staff, students, and discontents' (Michael-Fox and Calver 2023: 197). Not all screen representations of students work in the same way, and they're not all doing the same work. As Gates (2018: 14) writes, 'representations do not do the work by themselves, and, to take it a step further, they may not even do the work that we presume them to do'. As you engage with this issue via articles, podcast, reviews and roundtables, you will find a range of ideas about the representational work involved in screen cultures and in the construction of student identities.

Because of the complex and potentially competing meanings made via screen-based texts, situating them within the broader cultural context is an important dimension of much of the analysis. Creeber (2006: 35) argues, in relation to television, that it is 'not made or watched in a vacuum' and as such 'the institutional, technological, social and political conditions in which a programme is produced, broadcast and consumed are inevitably an important area for discussion'. For example, in relation to representations of students on screen, there are often highly gendered dimensions. Puwar (2004) has argued in her groundbreaking work on bodies and space that when women enter fields where the power of white men has been entrenched, they are not entering neutral or empty spaces but ones where a long history is already at play. This is especially true, perhaps, of the educational establishments that students occupy, in all the complex politically active and more passive ways in which space can be occupied. When screens represent students, they represent the spaces they inhabit and the contexts in which student identities are formed. They also often represent broader social concerns about students. Buckingham (2021: 2,10) has stated that television dramas 'have offered sensational and seductive representations of young people and their lives' but 'at the same time they may seek to provide cautionary tales or warning or to reinforce moralistic "adult" views'. This is particularly evident in a series like *Adolescence* (2025), a UK based drama about young teenage students, misogyny and violence. In this roundtable discussion, one of the contributors, Oli Belas (2025), argues that rather than the school students the series title suggests will form the focus of the series, *Adolescence* instead positions its adult characters as students. Whilst the adults are not officially enrolled on any course, they are deep in a learning experience of navigating the language, technology, attitudes, spaces and experiences of young people in the unfolding of a shocking violent crime. Again, as Buckingham (2021: 2) explains, 'representations of

youth on screen may tell us as much (or more) about adulthood' and adult concerns 'as they do about youth itself'. So, whilst many of the texts considered in this collection focus on students in formal educational settings and on young people in schools or universities, it is not always those characters who are doing the most learning.

Similarly, many of the texts analysed in this collection work at a meta-textual level as educational to audiences. Some genres do this more overtly, for example documentaries, and others more covertly. 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' and as such they 'lead viewers to expect certain experiences in particular situations, and suggest ways to behave'. Williams (2010: 70) also suggests that representations of students in the media might play a part in constructing 'ways of being' for students. As Tyler (2008: 18–19) has pointed out, mediation is 'a constitutive and generative process'. It may be inevitable that screen depictions offer condensed representations. When coupled with the requirement to be 'entertaining', this can lead to the reinforcement of particular '(stereo)types' of students. For example, as Roberts (2014) suggests, the dominant stereotypes of '"the lad", "the slut", "the introvert" and "the geek"'. Tyler (2008: 19) suggests it is through a figure's repetition in and across media that it acquires both 'accreted form' and 'affective value in ways that have significant social and political impact'. It is an interest in this relationship between screen representation and students' lived experiences that led us to initiating this special issue, and the broader project *Students on Screen*, as outlined below.

## Origins – the *Students on Screen* Project

This special issue stems from the *Students on Screen* project, which we began in 2021. Having worked together at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK when a reality-style television documentary entitled *Freshers* (2013) was being filmed, we started thinking about how students were being represented on screen. In the years following the release of the series, we had several encounters with applicants at open days who had seen it. Some mentioned being drawn to the open day because of watching it – especially those who found refreshing and motivating the series' representation of a student who revealed their diagnosis of Autism. Applicants reflected on the power of seeing 'someone like them' on screen. Others, in particular mature students, reflected on the absence of representations of older students in the programme, which focused on the early weeks of first-year students on campus, and some felt put off by the preponderance of images of 'drinking culture'. The series was the topic of much discussion on X (formerly Twitter) and amongst our families and friends. Kay's mum Sue watched the series and was shocked by a young student's admission that she had

never read a whole book. We enjoyed engaging in debates about how the series differed in its representation from our own university experiences, both as students and now lecturers. We thought about what elements of the student experience were emphasised, and which were downplayed or even absent. From this, we began to start reading and writing about students on screen.

We published two outputs in 2021. The first investigated how university students were conceptualised and represented in British documentary television (Calver and Michael-Fox 2021b). In it, we conceived of television as a space in which people experience and engage with complex social understandings and explored how televisual representations reflected and negotiated a range of prominent socio-cultural concerns about students. We explored how excessive, distorted and caricatured notions of the student on screen led to representations that are often polarised, with university students positioned as either 'at risk' and in need of protection or as posing 'a risk' to themselves, to other students, and to the university sector. In a context of shifting understandings about university students in Britain and when the expansion, cost, 'worth' and 'value' of higher education are all under scrutiny, we argued that media representations can both serve to highlight and evade the complex lived realities of university students. We also noted that representations of students seemed to have shifted, with depictions of students as either politically engaged activists or party-going care-free young people emerging less, and depictions of students as stressed, under pressure and at risk of exploitation becoming more prominent in recent years.

The second output we produced in 2021 focused explicitly on representation of university student suicide in three British television documentaries, and what these documentaries revealed about media constructions of suicide and the pressures young people experience at university (Calver and Michael-Fox 2021b). This was after a series of high-profile deaths by suicide in universities leading to three documentaries emerging in quick succession. Debates about the responsibility of individuals and the accountability of institutions came to the fore in these texts, with depictions of students as fully fledged and responsible adults jostling with the notion of students as 'adults in transition', at risk and in need of institutions to actively monitor and intervene in their lives. We argued in this article that these documentaries also offered insight into shifting media constructions of the student from 'fun-loving' and 'carefree' to 'under pressure' and 'at risk'. The emergence of these documentaries itself reflects a poignant and pressing social issue, and in them, student suicide is positioned not only as a profound personal loss, but as an economic loss to society in ways that complicate the notion of university as a 'social good'.

In 2023, we turned our attention away from documentary and instead to British satirical comedies about universities and the role that students play in these (Michael-Fox and Calver 2023). In a chapter focused on *The History Man* (1981), *A Very Peculiar Practice* (1986-1988) and *Campus* (2011), we explored how these comedies produce and negotiate popular cultural understandings of the academy, serving to demonstrate how certain ideas about British (and in an increasingly homogenised higher education system globally) universities have shifted or intensified over time, set in periods ranging from the 1970s to the 2000s. The tensions between the university as industry and education, and the pressures of the financialisation of higher education come to the fore in these dramatisations. Their narratives feature tropes familiar to those working in a university in almost any context, including funding cuts, corruption, redundancies, new buildings, stressed students, bureaucracy, and sexism as well as stereotypes of neurotic professors and ruthless Vice-Chancellors. These texts suggested not so much change but continuity and intensification in the challenges facing students and universities from the 1980s onwards. As satirical comedies rather than documentaries, these texts function to challenge shifts toward the neoliberal university, mocking the absurd and sometimes surreal practices of global higher education. In this work, we argued that whilst television can operate as a powerful form of popular culture mediating academia, it can also act as a form of critique, contributing to the cultural production of critical knowledge about the university, its staff, students, and discontents.

As the project gained more traction, Beth wrote for the Times Higher Education about her favourite fictional academic – Professor Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-20) and her troubled relationship with her students (Michael-Fox 2024). In the same year the *Students on Screen* project secured its first round of funding for a research study seeking to address a limitation of the project so far, specifically the absence of students working on it. With funding from Research England, three university students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the UK from two different universities were appointed as research assistants to help examine three television dramas – *Clique* (2017-2018), *Normal People* (2020) and *Big Boys* (2022-2025). Through a co-constructed analysis, we sought to examine the representation of students in these dramas. We presented a paper at the British Popular Cultures Conference in June 2025 to explore our findings, with a particular focus on representations of student mental health (Calver et al. 2025). We look forward to developing this work further. Our contribution to this special issue is outlined below along with the other contributors, and an overview of the issue.

## This Special Issue

Since its initial conception in 2021, this special issue has been a labour of love that we hoped would bring a range of viewpoints to further develop knowledge and understanding of representations of students on screen. With the outstanding support of the editorial team at *Open Screens* and the patience, skill and dedication of contributors, we are confident we have been able to achieve this aim.

In the issue, we take a broad understanding of the term screen to include film, television, social media, web series and videogames. The scope of the issue is international, with articles focusing on texts from or by authors residing in the UK, India, US, Italy, New Zealand and South Korea. We have sought to engage a range of scholars, with early career and highly established researchers featured. The issue is interdisciplinary, including submissions from a breadth of social science and humanities researchers, including criminologists, film academics, sociologists and education researchers and language specialists. Submissions focus on texts ranging from the 1980s British film Educating Rita to very recent examples such as Netflix's US series *The Chair* and the 2025 British drama *Adolescence*. We are also proud to include an episode of popular film podcast *The Cinematologists* (2015-present), offering a different route to access some of the key ideas, arguments and debates that feature in the issue.

The central themes in the issue are myriad. They include the shifting contexts of education and the consequences of this for student identity construction, and discrimination and exploitation in the context of students in terms of gender, 'race' and privilege. There is a concern both with moral panics regarding and the overall representation of the sensitive topics of student sex work, student death by suicide or murder, mental health and bullying, freedom of speech, and the risks and responsibilities at play when representing such potentially sensationalist issues via screens or the screen. How students navigate their own identities and the overlaps between screen representations and lived experience are considered in articles that explore social media usage and video games as well as documentary. As you explore the issue, outlined below, you will no doubt find themes that either resonate with or challenge your own experiences of education, and we hope that the issue offers you the opportunity to reflect on your own ideas about student identities and students on screen.

## An Overview of the Contributions

***Foreword* by Rachel Brooks:** In this Foreword, Professor Rachel Brooks, whose work has been instrumental in its examination of how student identities are constructed in our own work, offers insights into the notion of the student as a distinct social identity, particular in Europe. Brooks offers an overview of her own work in this area, and points

to how the international reach of this issue will serve to emphasise the 'reproductive and resistive potential of on-screen portrayals of students and their material impact.'

**Accompanying Episode of *The Cinematologists*:** In this episode of acclaimed film podcast *The Cinematologists* (2015-present) Neil talks to Kay and Beth about the *Students on Screen* project, as conveners and issue editors, as well as three other contributors. The other contributors are Sharon Coleclough, Devaleena Kundu and Oli Belas. The focus of all the conversations includes critical regard for the spaces where representations of students in fiction and non-fiction screen spaces can improve, address, or further address gaps in lived experience. Elsewhere in the episode, Neil and Dario, the podcast hosts, discuss representations of film students on screen and Neil's paper that forms part of the special issue.

**Representations of students and educational institutions in the Netflix series *Adolescence*: a roundtable discussion:** This roundtable discussion was added to the special issue due to the high-profile media response to the television series *Adolescence.* The series was released in 2025 and focused on the lives of young students in England. The roundtable explores how adolescence, student identity and educational institutions are framed and positioned in the series, with six UK-based educators from different settings reflecting on the series and engaging in a critical discussion regarding its representations of students on screen.

**The Emergence of the Student in *Colin in Black and White* and *Top Boy* by Oli Belas:** In the first article in this issue, Oli Belas takes a critical approach to the construction of the high (US) and secondary (UK) school student as subject in two television series: *Colin in Black and White* and *Top Boy*. Belas shows how *Colin in Black and White*, focused on the young student life of renowned basketball player Colin Kaepernick, functions to exemplify 'so many everyday microaggressions' experienced by Black students, and how 'such moments function microcosmically for the general fact of institutional and structural racism, precisely because they occur within the intersecting institutional-discursive bounds of formal education and sports.' He also shows how *Colin in Black and White* depicts a young Colin Kaepernick negotiating high school whilst simultaneously positioning its audience members as students. The series takes an educative role, and whilst it is '*about* and *for* Black and other minoritized persons and peoples, whose experiences and knowledges may be recognized by the show', it is also educative toward other[ed] audiences 'that may be in need of some schooling'. The second text he analyses is England-based television series *Top Boy*, focused on the lives and learning over five seasons of two young East London drug-dealers. Belas article addresses *Top Boy* as a series that shows 'those who would, could, or should be students emerge just out of the reach or sightlines of the school' – those whose opportunities to embrace

a student identity as it is conveyed in so many of the other texts examined in this collection is curtailed by structural conditions of poverty, geography and racism in a series that 'dramatises the limitations and failures of school and schooling's reach'. Belas shows how both series navigate exclusion, with *Colin in Black and White* charting exclusion from an oppressive educational system resistant to change, and in *Top Boy* showing what it is to be excluded even from entry to such a system.

**Revolting Youth: The Conflicted Representation of Students in Netflix's *The Chair* by Mark Readman:** Readman, in his article on the representation of higher education students and academic staff at a US university in *The Chair*, locates a 'complex and conflicted set of ideas about generational differences, the nature of higher education, and the contestation of knowledge in the academy'. Readman suggests that *The Chair* offers 'a romantic portrait of the passion and commitment of the student body, whilst undercutting this with a representation of young people who are quick to judge, unwilling to question, and easily offended'. In examining the series' representation of student protest, student 'voice', feedback surveys, student attitudes to reading and to academic staff, he produces an article that will give anyone working in Higher Education the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences of shifts in the academy and its student populations. Many of the topics he discusses are divisive, as was the series itself. Both *The Chair* and Readman's article on it offer interjections into contentious discussions of the marketisation of higher education, student protest, freedom of speech, racism and sexism on campus, the challenges and often poisoned chalice of academic leadership positions, and the overall role of Higher Education in society. Readman argues that 'ultimately, *The Chair* cannot decide whether students are the future of free thinking, or its enemy'. *The Chair* and its representation of students are in many ways thoroughly 'of the moment', reflecting many of the current challenges that students, universities and their staff face.

**Navigating Anxiety: The Multifaceted Representation of Students with Mental Health Conditions in Netflix's *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education* by Katie Brown and Megan Loveys:** This article considers two Netflix series, *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education*, that depict students with diagnosed mental health conditions. The authors utilise research into young people and mental health as well as representations of mental health to consider the key themes apparent in these series' depictions and to assess their accuracy and verisimilitude, arguing for the ethical importance of representations that are 'true to life' when it comes to students with mental health conditions on screen. The increased prevalence of depictions of students with diagnosed mental health conditions on screen itself might be a consequence of their increased prevalence off screen, with student mental health high on the agenda

from primary schools to university. As Brown and Loveys make clear, representing health conditions in entertainment media with care is important 'not only to facilitate representation but also to generate and open discussions about topics that children and adults alike may find difficulty in discussing'.

**Young Female University Students and the Dark Economy of Higher Education in British Television Dramas *Clique* (2017) and *Cheat* (2019) by Kay Calver and Bethan Michael-Fox:** Our own article explores the conceptualisation of young female university students and the university as an institution in two British television dramas: *Clique* and *Cheat*. We explore how higher education has increasingly been cast in news media and documentary coverage as a 'dark economy' with questionable recruitment practices, high-stakes assessment, and a profit-driven agenda. In such coverage, students have been problematically positioned both as 'victims' of a corrupt and profiteering system and as 'snowflakes' incapable of rising to the challenges of higher education. Both TV shows we analyse for this collection engage explicitly with these discourses. We analyse how they serve both to reinforce and undermine a range of social and cultural anxieties about young female students in the cultural space of the university, and argue that the genre positioning, aesthetic, and themes of the two series function to reflect a broader shift toward 'darker' representations of the university in popular culture that reveal widespread anxieties about shifts in the meaning and experience of a university education. We also argue that the positioning of the young women at the centre of these series as 'troubled' and 'traumatised' prior to their entry into the university functions to externalise the challenges currently facing British higher education, representing the student as 'the problem' rather than the university system itself.

**'100 Percent Selection Guaranteed': *Kota Factory* and Its Portrayal of Shadow Education by Devaleena Kundu:** This article focuses on the Indian web series *Kota Factory* and the role and purpose of 'shadow education' in India. The article situates and explains the concept of shadow education within a neoliberal education system and in relation to the commodification of education. It explains the role of coaching institutes that prepare students for competitive examinations, particularly in fields of engineering and medicine. It examines the promise of social mobility made through high-stakes shadow education, both in terms of the cost implications and the stress and anxiety students are depicted as experiencing. It shows how only a small percentage of students featured pass the entrance exams they are seeking to take and how, even for those that do, future 'success' is unclear in terms of whether that translates into high-paying status jobs. The article offers a critique of notions of success as being tied to exam results and cautions against the high-stakes shadow education system, which has been criticised due to links to increasing cases of death by suicide amongst the

student body. Exploring what it means to be successful in such a model of education, the article brings to the issue unique insights into a particular model of education and its representation on screen that resonate with some of the theme's key issues around the role and purpose of education and student mental health.

**Being Nick Von Sternberg: Critical Parodies of Film Students in Anglophone Cinema by Neil Fox:** In his article, Neil Fox considers the depiction of the film student on screen. Since the 1960s, Fox points out, the film school has emerged as a recognised training ground for professional filmmakers across the world, with many directors, cinematographers and screenwriters in discussions of their work citing the film school experience as formative. It is paradoxical, he argues, that on-screen representations of film schools and film students in American Cinema are often satires or parodies. He explores a 'knowing criticality' and use of humour in the films he analyses and argues that the framing of these depictions derives from a deep-rooted antagonism between industry and education stemming back to the emergence of film education in the 1930s. The depiction of film students in American film is shown to mirror dichotomies between thought and action, theory and practice that are in tension in education to this day. The article places the tension between industry and education identified here in historical context, examining the aims and structures of film education in the US from the 1930s onwards, and drawing out a discourse of distrust and ideological gatekeeping from the former towards the latter, through an analysis of US-based films about film schools and film students.

**TV depictions of student life: A comparative study of the US TV show *Greek* and the British TV show *Fresh Meat* by Pauline J. Reynolds:** This article emphasises the importance of screen representations as a tool to educate younger people about what university might be like. Reynolds points out that with a growing number of first-generation students applying for and attending institutions of higher education in Britain and the US, for many of them, the only knowledge or understanding they have about post-secondary education comes from TV screens and other media. The article examines the first season of US TV show *Greek* (2007-2011) and the first two seasons of British TV show *Fresh Meat* (2011-2013). Reynolds identifies what distinguishes the portrayals of students in British higher education from US portrayals, and vice versa. Reynolds reveals how the texts negotiate universities as places of learning for students and as places for students to negotiate difference, particularly regarding class. She argues that the series both bear the potential to influence the access, choice, and engagement of students by projecting exclusionary versions of who belongs, where they belong, and how students can demonstrate belonging.

**Filmic figurations of the 'a non-traditional' student: The pedagogical problems and possibilities of *Educating Rita* by Catherine Mitchell and James Burford:** This article argues that film and television texts are important forms of 'public pedagogy', providing not only entertainment for viewers but also shaping popular notions about universities and students. Exploring the 1980s British film *Educating Rita*, the article considers how screen representations relate to the concept of the sociological imagination, in particular here throughout the representation in the film of a non-traditional' higher education student. Depicting an older working-class woman who transitions to study at an elite university, the film contributed and continues to contribute to popular understandings of HE as it remains an enduring presence in classrooms around the world. Mitchell and Burford argue that whilst it is a text of pedagogical value, it is also a complex text which needs to be taught with great care due to its potentially troubling representations. They argue that the narrative of the film hinges on the stigmatisation of working-class family and culture, traditional notions that education leads to social mobility and ultimately 'escape', and that it reveals the university to be a fraught environment for an older, working-class woman.

**Navigating Dark Academia: Student Identity, Nostalgia, and neo-Victorian Influences Online by Zoe Bulaitis:** Bulaitis' article explores the convergence of contemporary student engagement in the 'dark academia' community online with fictional portrayals of elite higher education institutions found in neo-Victorian novels. Bulaitis examines this popular genre and its representation of students as well as the engagement of 'real' students with the genre via social media, considering what 'dark academia' reveals about student identities and acknowledging that unlike the analysis of student representation on television and film through tropes and character study, social media is a self-constructive media, therefore offering a notably different perspective. Bulaitis argues that through online engagement with 'dark academia', students can 'escape from their limited or underwhelming experiences or expectations of education in the twenty-first century.' The article covers not only dark academia but offshoots of it, such as 'desi romantic academia' and 'hijab academia', which 'show that an evolving community is using traditionally exclusionary sources as a platform to critique and imagine an inclusive future of global education'. Online engagement with 'dark academia' and its offshoots are shown to offer an opportunity for students to represent themselves in thoughtfully constructed ways that draw on resources from the past and problematic modes of representation – not rejecting them outright, but adopting and recirculating them 'as tools to generate wider conversations about educational value'.

**A Gendered Understanding of School Shootings on Screen by Selina Kerr:** Kerr's analysis of school shootings on screen argues that 'any approach to understanding school shootings must take the issue of gender seriously.' She considers how visual depictions engage with the gendered dimensions of school shootings in their representations of students and uses four texts as case studies that she argues subvert 'the traditional school shooting trope, challenging understandings of the phenomenon'. Kerr draws on her expertise on school shootings to examine how realistic representations of student shooters are. Kerr points out that 'the majority of fictional representations of school shootings seem to have been inspired by the infamous 1999 Columbine tragedy in which twelve students and a teacher were killed', showing how 'real' depictions of students on screen blur with fictional ones. Representations of school shooters on screen consistently mirror in her case studies 'real-life trends' as they all 'feature white, male school shooters', with some interesting caveats that help to produce not only representations of white male students as killers but also of female students as empowered and brave, as they become the heroic saviours in these narratives. Kerr also draws attention to the representational politics of school shootings when considered more broadly in the context of the US, pointing out that 'the predominantly white victims of school shootings become signifiers for the 'idealised child' in America; something which does not occur with racial minority gun violence victims' who may also be young students.

**Unravelling the Thread of Elegant Lies: The Depiction of Students and Teenage Bullying in South Korean Film:** Song's analysis of the film *Thread of Lies* explores the impact of teenage bullying and the significance of culture and family, beauty, academic success, and money in South Korean students' lives. Adapted from a novel of the same name that was popular with young adult audiences, the film depicts the aftermath of young female student Cheonji's death by suicide, with a focus on a hidden life of depression and bullying. The series deals with many of the same themes as *Adolescence*, considered in the roundtable discussion in this issue, in terms of its representation of 'unknowing' adults. A direct word-to-word translation of the film's title — *Uahan Geojinmal*— as Song explains, from Korean to English, is 'Elegant Lies'. This article examines the intersections of family, friends, economic class, and academic performance, which work to heighten the conflict and competition between students in this film. In a country that has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries at 26 per 100,000 population, *Thread of Lies* provides meaningful representation of middle and high school students within a single-sex educational environment, grappling with the complexities of success and acceptance.

**School Spaces and Subjecthood in Netflix's *Baby* by Julia Heim:** Heim considers how the Italian Netflix series *Baby* represents the limitations and contradictions of

various social structures, including schools, that seek to shape students as subjects. Heim argues that rather than merely a reflection of moral panic about youth, *Baby* and its representation of student sex workers is more pointedly a reflection of a waning (if ever thoroughly present) belief in the figures and institutions that claim to educate students. School functions as 'a locus of social control, a heterotopic container where students must stay and be surveyed until they are deemed sufficiently socialized.' Heim analyses students' relationships to graffiti, school corridors, and the digital hallways of social media engagement, locker rooms and bathrooms, classrooms and playgrounds, exploring how misogyny and patriarchy play out in these spaces as they function to contain and inform the subjectivity of students. Whilst Heim examines how students on screen can be shown to behave in unexpected ways, their representation in this series also shows students who 'generally adhere to the educational and financial expectations' and 'repeat and thus reify many normative standards'. Yet within the confines and complexities of the spaces they inhabit, they also show agency – manipulating and navigating those spaces as they show their need for a 'a different social model that may choose support above regulation, and care above discipline.'

**The pleasure of prohibited spaces – playing school student characters in video games by Sharon Coleclough:** This article on videogames that deploy student characters in school settings demonstrates how such games allow for players to experiment with student identities and school environments 'without consequence.' Coleclough explores the notion of exploratory 'brink play', which whilst not inherently 'transgressive', offers a space in which 'chances can be taken with interactions which would not normally be sought in the real world' – a chance for players to be their 'best' and 'worst' selves. Her work here on representations of students in game echoes Zoe Bulaitis' on young people's social media use in relation to 'dark academia', whereby student identities can be actively negotiated and experimented within online spaces. The games Coleclough examines represent 'a variety of engagement with the school space but in each case the location forms a vessel in which core knowledge and understanding of stereotypical characters and relationships' can be navigated, with issues of identity, in particular gender and sexuality, often coming to the fore. There is also a significant element of transgressive play in games that include child death, and Coleclough considers the nuanced justifications that emerge in these games. She notes how those where student characters kill other student characters are more digestible by audiences and less likely to incur a 'moral panic' when those being killed are framed as zombies rather than as other 'living' students, considering the game *Active Shooter*, a school shooter game that was withdrawn due to its depictions of the kinds of school shootings that Kerr considers in her article.

We conclude the issue with two book reviews – one written by Adam Chapman on the edited collection *Constructing the Higher Education Student* edited by Rachel Brooks, Achala Gupta, Sazana Jayadeva, Anu Lainio and Predrag Lažetić and one written by Symon Quy on *Mediated Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning on Screen* by Mark Readman.

## Competing Interests

Dr Bethan Michael-Fox is the spouse of Professor Neil Fox, author of one of the articles in the issue and co-host of the podcast *The Cinematologists*, of which there is an episode included in this issue. Dr Kay Calver managed the peer review of Professor Fox's article and Dr Bethan Michael-Fox was not involved in any decision making about this article.

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