CAPITULATION TO COOL?:
THOUGHTS ON CONFERENCES 2015-2017

William Brown (University of Roehampton)

— What is it that you do?

— Me?

— Oh, I'm a lecturer at a university.

— In what?

— I'm sorry?

— What do you lecture in?

— Oh. Er, film. Like, cinema.

The above conversation is one that I have semi-regularly with people whom I meet. It tends to continue in one of two ways. Either the next line is "oh, that's really cool," or it is something along the lines of "you can study that?" Both responses, to perceive the study of film as cool and to question the study of film as a whole, are problematic and linked. It is not that any subject of study should be beyond question. Nonetheless, that it remains questionable to some people that others study what is probably the most influential medium of the twentieth century (together with its offspring media like television and the internet) suggests an ongoing perception — at least in some quarters — that film is not a legitimate object of study. Indeed, so wary of this perception am I, that I often hesitate and avoid the question when asked what I lecture in (as per the conversation above). This is because I am worried that my interlocutor will think me an academic lightweight because I work in what might colloquially be described as a "doss" subject, which then typically prompts me to say that I also have studied languages and philosophy in order to show that I might be a bit more heavyweight than I come across.

I am sure that many of my colleagues do not suffer from the same paranoia as I do, even if it is a tradition (often not without reason) for all disciplines (and all fields within all disciplines) to feel embattled and to consider as rivals all those around them. Nonetheless, the perception that film is "cool" is equally problematic; not only does it in some senses reinforce the idea that it is an easy subject ("a doss" — from the Latin *dorsum*,

i.e., something that one can do lying down), but it also conflates the study for its subject. That is, films are often peddled to us as "cool" — in order that we might go to watch them. But we do not produce cool; we study cool, analyzing how it is constructed, how it works, and what it means. In some senses, this means that film studies is the antithesis of cool, as can be seen in the yearly round of dissatisfaction from at least a handful of students at every institution that offers the topic when they realize that studying cinema is not as cool as what they thought they had signed up for. It can also be seen in the numerous conversations that perhaps all film scholars have had, in which one is accused of "over-analysing" a movie that really does not merit that much scrutiny — for example, considering the philosophical implications of *Weekend at Bernie's II* (dir. Robert Klane, 1993).

Nonetheless, while film studies might have initially wanted to penetrate, deconstruct and look at the inner workings of cool, increasingly we find ourselves complicit with cool in our work. Where once film schools were separate to academic institutions, now growing numbers of universities offer degrees that at least in part provide filmmaking options. That is, students increasingly are asked in some senses not just to study, but also to produce cool.

There is a tension at work here. Students are surrounded by cool things as they grow up thanks to the cool media that pervade their lives (no real reference to Marshall McLuhan is intended, not least because he considers cinema not to be a "cool" medium, unlike television, but to be "hot" as a result of the way that it consumes our attention when we watch films in the black box of the theatre; nonetheless, the ghost of McLuhan can be allowed to linger).[1] With coolness functioning as a symbol of success and thus of power, and having been socialized to want to imitate success and to aspire to power, young people perhaps naturally want to go into the industries of cool. In some senses, to say that one studies something cool like film is by proxy "cool" in itself. But one sometimes can feel that students arrive at university expecting, or at least hoping, to have an avenue towards cool opened up for them — and so the way in which one then provides a deconstruction of cool, which necessarily involves an attempt not to take students towards but to distance them from cool, can indeed be disappointing for students. In an age when free higher education has all but disappeared, and when university fees are on the rise in much of the Anglophone world, to lure students in with a promise of cool that

is not subsequently delivered can even feel exploitative: I was promised cool, and all I got was an education that destroyed the fun of cool.

And yet, as cool proliferates (we are surrounded by so many media saying so many different things now that we claim to live in age that has moved beyond the concept of truth), and as cool becomes ever more influential in our lives, clearly people are needed to meet the ever-rising demands for cool by producing it. That is, universities are not wrong to invite students to produce cool, since cool continues to be a growth industry (even if many aspects of the cool industry are not particularly cool, and even if many of the jobs that students get are not cool enough in relation to the jobs to which they aspire). Personally, I hold strongly that if you want to end up producing cool, you still have critically to study cool and to know how it works, even if any late teenager believes that their grasp of cool (seemingly so intuitive, but really inherited from the wealth of cool that surrounds them) is so good that they do not need (and sometimes reject) that critical approach to it. You can't manufacture a car if all you have ever done is drive one. You need to get under the bonnet, etc. And so it is with cool: you need to take it apart in order to put it back together again, both technically and ideologically. Nonetheless, since the demand for cool grows, it also makes sense for students to try to produce some cool at university, in order to understand it not just as an object, but from the inside, as a subject (even if the cool that students produce is regularly not that cool, and even if students blame this lack of coolness on the tools provided by their university, which simply were just not cool enough). Indeed, this helps to improve the employability of the students, who are destined to have to eke out a living in an increasingly cool world.

It is not that all students want to study film (or cool more generally). While numbers at my university are strong for film, for example, it is degrees like business that really are attracting students in droves. However, even business degrees have a growing quotient of cool included in their syllabus in order both to enhance the employability of the students (they will also have to eke out a living in an increasingly cool world), and to make their program itself seem cool (I offer the odd class to business students about filmmaking). If cool and power are basically synonymous, this overlap of business and film even makes sense; indeed, there is no business like show business, including business for show.

However, while film degrees are not expanding exponentially in the face of the cool world (and while I do not therefore want to offer up too parochial a perspective on matters), it is perhaps as a result of the pressures of the cool world that we are seeing a

rise in cool production alongside the more traditional study of cool. That is, increasingly we see a growing number of symposia, as well as panels at major conferences, discussing the relationship between practice and theory.

The questions discussed take several forms. Firstly, there has of late been a growing questioning of what role practice can play in the life of an academic — a question that most often gets asked by academics who, thanks to the easy access of DVD-ripping, editing and online publishing software, have recently become filmmakers — although it can also get asked by filmmakers who more recently have become academics as a result of diminishing funding for their (alternative) work in the face of the increased homogenization of cool in the increasingly cool world. For example, at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Conference, held in 2016 in Atlanta, there were various panels and workshops dedicated to this issue, including Video Essays in Transnational Cinema Studies (chaired by Tracy Cox-Stanton), The Attainable Text? Reflecting Upon The Evolving Status of Videographic Film Studies and Criticism (chaired by Mariachiara Grizzaffi), and New Directions in Videographic Criticism (chaired by Christian Keathley). Meanwhile, the 2016 Film-Philosophy Conference, held at the University of Edinburgh, also featured various panels that combined not just work about essay-films, but also actual essay-films as conference contributions.

Secondly, if the essay-film or video-essay (which I shall allow for present purposes to be conflated) are increasingly commonplace in the present era, then it comes as no surprise that there has been an upsurge in conferences that look at the history and global reach of the form, including the World Cinema and the Essay Film Conference held at the University of Reading back in 2015. More to the point, I should like to highlight the organization of the Essay Film Festival by, among others, Michael Temple and Sarah Joshi at Birkbeck, University of London's Institute for the Moving Image (BIMI). In 2016, this event featured a retrospective of the work of Kidlat Tahimik, as well as material by Mark Rappaport and Richard Misek. I highlight this annual event for several reasons: a) in being a festival as opposed to a traditional conference, but nonetheless in operating out of a university, the Essay Film Festival points to the growing overlap not just of production and criticism, but also exhibition and criticism; b) in being an event open not just to scholars but also to the general public, the event points to the push towards film studies to make itself relevant to the outside world; c) but in showing films in some senses more

than discussing them, we see here the role that cool is beginning to play in (at least British) higher education.

Thirdly, there is a move towards not just producing video-essays within the academy and then exporting the alternative culture of the essay-film beyond the academy, but also towards trying to understand the growth of teaching film production in the classroom, including the production of video-essays and essay-films (which I hope that readers will forgive me for continuing to use interchangeably). For example, Beyond Application: Immanent Encounters between Philosophy & the Arts, due to be held at the University of Surrey in January 2017 will involve considerations of, in the words of organiser Laura Cull, "how arts research might move beyond the mere application of existing philosophy to the arts and towards a new paradigm in which art might be considered as a source of new modes of philosophising or ways of thinking."[2] Part of this process, then, will involve the teaching of art production in precisely these terms. Meanwhile, the upcoming Symposium on Media, Communication, and Film Studies Programs at Liberal Arts Colleges (MCFLAC) at Colby College in Maine will also involve discussion of how to combine theory and practice in the classroom, and in a way that remains both academically rigorous while also appealing to cool-saturated students.

Perhaps it goes without saying that universities must bear in mind the employability of their students, while also needing to offer programs that will attract students who otherwise pay so much money to study. Perhaps it also goes without saying that in the face of reduced funding, programs must also develop ways to prove their relevance and ongoing importance not just within the cloisters of academia, but also to the wider world, and with an especial emphasis on working with, and even changing practice within, the business world — a concept that in the UK is referred to often as impact. As business increasingly becomes show, the study of show business is to this author of obvious relevance. As the study of show business itself comes under pressure not just to critique but also to adopt the methods of show, or of cool, then clearly methods of study, methods of production, methods of dissemination and methods of pedagogy must change. We must be wary not to lose some of the important insights that traditional film studies can offer: how a film means, how cinema as an institution works. Text, or written language, lingers as an important if not vital tool in providing an apt critical distance from the otherwise audiovisual media so as more insightfully to be able to comment upon it. Nonetheless, while the coolification of film studies — and academia more generally —

might not necessarily provide the same distance (it runs the risk of repeating rather than penetrating cool), it does offer us an opportunity to think about the cool world from within. It may only be by taking part in that cool world — as opposed to looking at it from without — that one can change it, by contributing alternative tempos and alternative tempers, and thereby modifying its temperature.

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1. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2001).
2. Laura Cull, personal correspondence with the author, 6 Apr. 2016.