

A CURRENT CENSORIAL THREAT TO FILM STUDIES IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

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Recent events at the London College of Printing indicate how far a misguided university management is prepared to go in the mistaken belief that courses need to become more vocational in order to compete in the educational marketplace. The BA in Film and Video at LCP has a long-standing reputation in both the industry and the academic world as one of the first degrees of its kind in Britain, a practice-led course with a significant critical component and a commitment to nurturing the skills needed for independent film and video production in a fast changing audio-visual world. This course, which has long attracted students from all over Europe as well as Africa, Asia and Latin America, around a half or more of them women, is now being decimated by a college management team which simply ignores the complaints of the students themselves that recent changes make the course almost unrecognisable.

According to the students, "The content of the course has taken a decisive lurch towards classical mainstream Hollywood and all the political implications that has." They believe that the new course leader has violated the provisions of the institution's equal opportunities policy by removing the study of Latin American and African cinema, Women's cinema, recent British and American independent film and video and other areas; while authors removed from reading lists include Armes & Malkmus, myself, Diawara, Downing, Eagleton, Fanon, King, Kuhn, Macpherson, Pick, and Pines & Willemen. (I am proud to be in this company.) This reorientation of the course has not been put through without opposition from lecturers, to which management responded with bullying and victimisation, which is always an admission of the intellectual poverty of the perpetrators' arguments.

Changes like these are not possible without going through the system which used to be called peer review and is nowadays called 'quality control'. The shift in terminology is highly symptomatic. It is imported into the new managerialism of higher education from commercial management practice, and on a symptomatic level, or in ideological terms, carries the implication that lecturers are to be regarded as production line workers and students as mere raw material being turned into commodities. Although in that case they're a peculiar kind of commodity, because at the same time they're also regarded as customers, especially since they nowadays pay fees (re-introduced in Britain three years ago as one of the first actions of Tony Blair's New Labour government). Which makes them, let's say, self-acting commodities with the right to sue their manufacturer for breach of contract. This is confirmed by a recent judgement against the University of Lincolnshire & Humberside. [1] No wonder there is now systemic disarray in the institutions of higher education over the problem of student complaints.

According to this judgement, it is a breach of contract if assessments are not conducted according to the book, or arbitrary changes are introduced into the assessment procedures, things which have also happened on the film and video course at LCP. [2] What has happened here is in fact a failure in 'quality control' within the London Institute, to which the college belongs; a failure which ought to be of serious concern to the funding agencies - except that when such complaints are made to them they reply that they have no remit to intervene. The changes in film and video were introduced not only against the advice of course lecturers but also one of the external examiners. The procedures were truncated. The college's Dean of Quality and Marketing has even denied being aware of student dissatisfaction, despite receiving their letters of complaint. There is a pattern of improprieties here, and double standards, which seems to conform to what the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life observed when it looked at higher education in 1996. 'In our view', says their Second Report, "it is not possible to detach [the] open tradition of academic life from the management of the institution without doing damage both to academic standards and to administrative propriety: the two are linked, and it is significant that secretive decision-making processes seem to have been a common feature on those occasions when things went awry." The glove fits perfectly.

A certain degree of insulation against mismanagement is provided as long as each school or department in the college is headed by an academic who respects the academic freedom of the staff. Academic freedom here means two things. First, it means the narrow and specific freedom defined by act of parliament and written into academic contracts of employment, "to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial and unpopular opinions" without risk to job or privileges.

But in Nolan's view, it also applies to the wider tradition of participation in the governance of the institution. This tradition has been under attack since the introduction of new managerial and administrative practices by the Thatcherites through the Jarratt Report of 1985, which turned vice-chancellors into chief executives and introduced the line management system, management terminology and performance indicators. But the real problem begins when the management of the school is no longer in the hands of an academic, and then the split between managerial and academic values becomes palpable. This is what has happened in the Media School, which now has a dean who comes from an industry background and seems to think that academic freedom is a myth. [3]

For insight one can turn to the domain of social psychiatry. The school has become what one analyst calls an 'anti-requisite' organisation. [4] If requisite organisations are those which foster positive internal relations, the anti-requisite raises obstacles to normal relationships and takes on 'paranoia-genic' features, by creating hostility, resentment and anxiety. Those involved become so concerned about their own positions, so bogged down by their own institutional norms, that they lose touch with the primary objective - in this case the education of students. The institution becomes an end in itself, not a means of educating students and encouraging scholarship. The behaviour of management becomes irrational as it closes ranks and acts against its own interests by ignoring signals and warning signs of problems and trouble. The result is institutional negligence of its primary *raison d'être* - the students come last instead of first.

Another analyst describes this as pathological functioning within institutions. There are several reasons, says Otto Kernberg, Professor of Psychiatry at Cornell, why such institutions may become dysfunctional, including lack of resources and excessive external constraints. Whatever the causes, the effect is that regressive group processes rapidly emerge, and performance suffers. This is what is called 'loss of morale', and leads to the "activation of narcissistic and paranoid group formation" within the institution. [5]

Lack of resources and excessive external constraints are dominant features in the higher education sector in Britain at the turn of the century, especially among the 'new universities', the ones which like the London Institute were previously polytechnics or art schools, where

collegial traditions are weak and managerial power strongest. To increase the numbers of students in higher education while proportionately reducing the funds to support them cannot possibly improve the teaching. Nor can the damage be repaired by imposing a system of regulation of academic standards and Orwellian quality control as a damage limitation exercise. The effects can be found in universities up and down the country, as reflected in cases and incidents reported practically every week in the sector's journal of record, the Times Higher Educational Supplement, and many others which never get reported.

Kernberg describes what happens in such situations as a process "unconsciously fostered by the entire organisation" in which dissociated feelings of aggression are projected onto those in positions of authority, who readily reciprocate. Here, what Jürgen Habermas calls communicative action - meaning the rational attempt to reach agreement - is seriously undermined. In other words, dialogue is suppressed, even when conducted through the proper channels; managerial discourse becomes monological; the managers give the impression that they're not listening. They hear, but they cannot understand: managerialism damages the higher cognitive functions of the brain. Or as Karl Kraus said about psychoanalysis, it is the disease of which it purports to be cure.

The episode raises another disturbing question. It has emerged that the London Institute has been acting on the margins of the law or even outside it. First, the procedures in operation constitute a breach of natural justice, which holds that no-one should be a judge in their own case, because here it happens that the person who brings a disciplinary charge becomes the chair of the panel which hears the case. Doubtless the Institute's procedures are more or less the same as in other universities. Second, following a recent judgement by the appeals court known as the Locabail judgement, it is clear that a tribunal of any sort, including a grievance hearing in public bodies like universities, is invalid if there is a likelihood of bias, which frankly is not difficult to demonstrate in a case like this. [6]

There is one small glimmer of hope. The government has finally recognised there is a mess which they have to try and clear up urgently, and in June Tessa Blackstone, the minister responsible for higher education, announced a change in government policy. She told the Quality Assurance Agency that the government now wants to introduce an ombudsman 'by the end of the year', because otherwise 'universities could fall foul of the Human Rights Act' when it comes in next October. [7] This will be good news for students, but the same considerations apply to lecturers, and what is now needed is strong pressure on the government not to fudge the issue, and to ensure that any higher education ombudsman will be able to deal with all complaints and grievances by students and staff that are not resolved internally within strict time limits.

Michael Chanan has now left the LCP. In Fall 2000 he is visiting professor at Duke University in the USA, and then takes up a post at the University of the West of England in Bristol. [Visit his website.](#)

Readers are invited to support the Council for Academic Standards and Academic Freedom which campaigns on the issues raised in these paragraphs.

Notes

1. See 'Court has power in new university dispute', The Times, 3 May 2000.
2. See 'Victory for film student', Times Higher Education Supplement, 23.6.2000
3. See Sally Feldman, 'When passions fly', Guardian Education, 13 June 2000.
4. See Leonard Fagin, 'Paranoia in institutional life' in Joseph Berke, et.al., eds., Even

Paranoids Have Enemies, Routledge, 1998

5. Otto Kernberg, 'Paranoid social developments as a consequence of ideological and bureaucratic regression' in *ibid.*

6. The text of this judgement can be found on the web at [this page](#).

7. 'Visitors days numbered', THES 16 June 2000.