

Article

Six years of School of Media: Exploring specialist pathways for film education throughout students' experiences of Scottish secondary school

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Submission date: 26 February 2021; Acceptance date: 14 May 2021; Publication date: 23 November 2021

How to cite

Abercrombie, K. and Chambers, J. (2021) 'Six years of School of Media: Exploring specialist pathways for film education throughout students' experiences of Scottish secondary school'. *Film Education Journal*, 4 (2), 86–107. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/FEJ.04.2.01>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access

Film Education Journal is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

Co-authored by Scottish secondary school teacher Kerry Abercrombie and film education practitioner Jamie Chambers, this article explores School of Media, a specialist pathway within a Scottish secondary school in which young people are able to engage with film education potentially throughout their entire experience of high school. First exploring how School of Media seeks to reconcile aspects of film education with Scotland's national 'Curriculum for Excellence', this essay subsequently adopts a chronological perspective, detailing specific aspects of School of Media's approach within each of the six years of secondary school. The essay concludes by emphasising the importance of enabling and empowering teacher-led approaches to film education within Scottish classrooms.

Keywords secondary school; film education; media education; specialist pathway; Harry Potter; student film-making; Curriculum for Excellence; Scotland

While significant challenges remain, Scottish teachers are starting to find their own ways to integrate film education into the wider national curriculum. In this respect, Michael Daly, Jacqueline Thomson and Jamie Chambers's (2020) recent essay in the *Film Education Journal* – 'Securing a place for film within the ongoing life of a Scottish state secondary school' – has served to open up an important conversation for considerations of Scottish film education by looking at how film education is starting to be embedded by Scottish teachers in longer-term capacities into both curricular and extra-curricular settings within schools. Beyond the affordances of short-term projects run by external organisations, film education is starting to find longer-term footholds within secondary school curricula, at the initiative of Scottish teachers. This essay seeks to follow directly in the footsteps of Daly et al. (2020), in exploring a case study in which aspects of film education have been further embedded into wider curriculum frameworks within a Scottish secondary school, this time as a focused pathway encompassing all six years of secondary study.

Larbert High School is a large secondary school in Stenhousemuir within the local council area of Falkirk. At the time of writing, Larbert is, with just under two thousand students, one of the largest secondary schools in Scotland. Since 2009, Larbert has been running a series of a specialised pathways through secondary education, which allow students to choose a particularised focus for their education lasting potentially throughout the remainder of their time at the school. Alongside the School of Rugby, the School of Dance and the School of Languages is the School of Media. Potentially lasting all six years of a student's time at Larbert (although students may latterly choose to opt out should they wish), the School of Media moves from initial aspects of more general education (known in Scotland as 'Broad General Education' (BGE) in S1 to S3; ages 12–14), supports students through a series of national examinations (National 5s and Highers, in S4 and S5 respectively; ages 14–16), before opening up scope for more independent, exploratory study (during 'Wider Achievement Opportunities' in S5 and S6; ages 15–18). While the specialist pathways embodied within the 'School of' programmes are currently relatively unique to Larbert within the wider landscape of Scottish secondary education, there seems to be awakening interest in such an approach elsewhere in the country, and Larbert is at present in conversation with other schools considering adopting similar approaches. It is thus one of the objectives of this article to provide an insight into how such a specialised pathway operates, for those considering exploring similar approaches.

Larbert is the designated secondary school for seven primary schools within Falkirk Council: Stenhousemuir Primary, Larbert Village Primary, Ladeside Primary, Carron Primary, Kinnaird Primary, Carronshore Primary and Airth Primary. Every year, P7 students (10–11 years old, final year of primary education) from these feeder schools are invited to apply for one of Larbert's specialised 'School of' programmes. Larbert regularly accepts two School of Media classes of approximately 25 students each, meaning a maximum of 50 School of Media students within any given year group (approximately 15 per cent of a full year group). In 2020, School of Media received over 140 applicants, meaning that the application process is competitive. Following an initial digital application, prospective applicants are invited to one of Larbert's various in-person 'Challenge Events' for each respective 'School of' programme. Here, School of Media students are assessed through a variety of practical and written tasks, and group activities which seek to ascertain students' early degree of knowledge of film and/or media, alongside their ability to demonstrate creativity and participate in a team. While School of Media tends to attract a lot of applicants enthusiastic about engaging with film and different forms of media, one of the challenges in recent years has been the rise in popularity of content-creation platforms such as YouTube, which many students now cite as a primary source of moving-image-based entertainment. While this can be a positive factor, frequently reflecting a desire to learn how to produce content, it can also present challenges, given the differences in form, genre and style between online content and the films that students will go on to study.

School of Media was delivered for the first time in 2015, and has now been running for six years, meaning that the inaugural cohort of School of Media students are now in their final year of school. In the six years since its inception, School of Media has evolved to adopt a more rigorous approach to its

teaching; learning from initial, broader approaches wherein students were given relatively loose briefs to respond to as they saw fit, School of Media now adopts a more formalised pedagogy, although individual teachers still retain significant degrees of autonomy over what exactly they teach. There are currently four teachers who run the School of Media programme, of which I (Kerry) have recently been one. Larbert is currently looking to expand this provision, however, through evening teacher development (CLPL – career-long professional learning) sessions run for English teachers with a personal interest in film, who have been identified by the school as potential media teachers.

This essay provides a detailed, year-by-year case study of School of Media's pedagogical approach, exploring the different film education-related activities that students currently undertake during their six years at Larbert. In doing so, we explore how different forms of film education – albeit within a wider media studies context – are reconciled within the wider constraints and affordances of the Scottish curriculum. Considering the place of this essay within the *Film Education Journal*, we have sought specifically to emphasise those aspects of School of Media activity pertaining most directly to cinema, while also seeking to preserve some of the particular inflections inherited through approaching film education within the wider context of media studies. In doing so, this essay draws on the complementary perspectives of Kerry Abercrombie, one of Larbert's School of Media teachers, and Jamie Chambers, a film education practitioner within Scottish primary and secondary schools, and a lecturer in film at the University of Edinburgh. In combining our two perspectives, we shift between collective pronouns (we, our) when more explicitly speaking together, and a first-person register (I, me) in sections in which Kerry presents her experiences at Larbert more directly.

In what follows, we first explore a broader discussion of how film education fits (or, rather, struggles to fit) within Scotland's national Curriculum for Excellence framework, before going on to provide a relatively detailed account of the learning activities with which School of Media students at Larbert High School engage in each of their years of study.

Attempting to reconcile film education with the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence

Within Scottish educational contexts, all formal learning activities for students aged between 3 and 18 must justify themselves before Scotland's 'Curriculum for Excellence', an educational policy framework produced by government body Scottish Education that seeks to standardise certain core expectations about student learning across a diverse number of learning contexts nationwide. In their first few years at secondary school (until national examinations start, typically in S4 upwards) students participate in what the Curriculum for Excellence terms 'Broad General Education', in which young people engage with a relatively compulsory set of subjects across a number of school departments, before being subsequently granted a degree of choice to enrol in the subjects in which they wish to take exams. Following their time in Broad General Education, Scottish students tend to sit National 5 exams in S4, Higher exams in S5, and Advanced Higher exams in S6. For these pre-exam aspects of secondary education (along with primary school education), the Curriculum for Excellence provides a series of predetermined 'Experiences and Outcomes' ('Es and Os'), a selection of which teachers are required to meet within each learning activity. Divided into a series of categories (expressive arts, health and wellbeing, languages, mathematics, religious and moral education, sciences, social studies and technologies), with a number of further underlying themes which all subjects are expected to cover (literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing), Es and Os consist of a series of first-person statements that teachers are asked to verify as being true for every child in their class (for example, 'Inspired by a range of stimuli, I can express and communicate my ideas, thoughts and feelings through drama' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 7)).

Reflecting the struggles of educators worldwide to establish film as a cultural medium meriting the same serious engagement and study as literature, dance and other more traditionally accepted art forms, film education does not at present find an easy fit within Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, awkwardly

straddling various different aspects of the framework without finding any particular resting place. Within the category of expressive arts, where one might expect film to find its most organic home, music, drama and dance each have their own subcategories, while film falls awkwardly between aspects of the more generalised category of 'art and design' (Level 4: 'I have continued to experiment with a range of media and technologies, handling them with control and assurance to create images and objects; I can apply my understanding of the properties of media and of techniques to specific tasks' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 61)) and the similarly generalised 'participation in performances and presentations' (Level 4: 'I have experienced the energy and excitement of presenting/performing for different audiences' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 60)). While aspects of film education might also seem to fall within the category of 'technology' (in terms of the use of digital technologies to shoot and edit), the Curriculum for Excellence's breakdown of digital learning again makes for an awkward fit (Level 4 digital literacy is defined as 'I can select and use digital technologies to access, select relevant information and solve real world problems' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 307)).

Some mention of film *is*, however, included within cross-curricular specifications of 'literacy across learning' (Level 4, listening and talking: 'I can show my understanding of what I listen to or watch by giving detailed, evaluative comments, with evidence, about the content and form of short and extended texts' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 28); Level 4, reading: 'I regularly select and read, listen to or watch texts for enjoyment and interest, and I can express how well they meet my needs and expectations and give reasons, with evidence, for my personal response. I can independently identify sources to develop the range of my reading' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 30)). Indeed, this inclusion of film within broader understandings of literacy reflects a general sense within Scotland's formal curriculum (and the Scottish Qualifications Authority's currently available exams) that film as a medium falls somewhere between English and media. As we explore further below, this is indicative of a sense of liminality between English and media as subjects in Scotland, with film starting to gain a foothold as a 'text' as part of the English curriculum, and many teachers initially training as English teachers before moving sideways into media, as is being encouraged at Larbert. As Daly et al. (2020: 168) have described:

... as one does not need a specific qualification in order to teach media in a school (and as there is currently no media-specific option in Scottish graduate teacher training), the majority of media studies teachers in Scotland tend (in our experience at least) to be those who trained initially as English teachers. ... My experience subsequently working with film in curricular settings has reflected the sense that film as a medium in Scottish classrooms falls somewhere between English – in which it can be treated as a text (albeit often with an emphasis on the narrative parameters most resembling a novel) – and media, where there is less of a textual focus and individual 'texts' are presented more for the manner in which they exemplify media and broader societal factors.

Arguably, as has been suggested elsewhere (Donnelly et al., 2018; Chambers, forthcoming), film also has an important role to play in the development of *emotional* literacy, through the use of narrative fiction to explore difficult issues and experiences within students' lives. Here, productive further research might be conducted to explore how film fits within the Curriculum for Excellence's understanding of health and wellbeing where many of the listed Es and Os (for example, 'I am aware of and able to express my feelings and am developing the ability to talk about them' (Education Scotland, n.d.: 80)) would seem to hold considerable relevance for the process of both making and watching films in which complex emotions and empathies are explored.

Overall, the Curriculum for Excellence in its current form arguably reflects relatively conservative or outdated perspectives upon the place of film within school-based learning. As a result, teachers seeking to use film in the classroom frequently find themselves having to cobble together relatively scattershot collections of 'Es and Os', assembling pedagogical justifications for film education from a lexicon in which the medium of film has been given little consideration. Nonetheless, in our experience, Scottish teachers

continue to find resourceful means of delivering and justifying film education within the strictures of the Curriculum for Excellence, as we shall now go on to detail in consideration of the different activities with which students engage as part of School of Media.

First and second year: Broad General Education (12–14 years old)

In their first year at Larbert (S1; 11–12 years old), students are placed in a School of Media class which subsequently serves as the peer group with whom they will experience much of their S1 studies, whether related to media or not. Recalling the close relationship between English and media within the wider Scottish curriculum, School of Media classes in their first year are given the sometimes challenging responsibility of simultaneously covering Curriculum for Excellence 'Es and Os' for English and literacy, and the more discipline-specific 'Es and Os' of School of Media. This latter set of Experiences and Outcomes is assembled by School of Media teachers, drawn from expressive arts (pertaining to the Broad General Education phase), with slight tweaks to aspects of wording. Particular aspects of vocabulary are slightly reshaped in order to fit and thus, for example, 'I can use different mediums to...' becomes 'I can use film language to...', and so on.

The first practical task that students undertake in their first year of School of Media is linked to a writing exercise that all S1 students at Larbert are asked to do – a piece of personal writing about the transition from primary to secondary education. At this early stage, one of School of Media's key aims is to approach as many tasks as possible through explorations of media. With this in mind, following on from this initial writing exercise, the first film-related task that I (Kerry) ask School of Media students to undertake centres upon the analysis of film posters from coming-of-age films, and how these posters indicate and articulate aspects of genre. Here what begins as a discussion of genre analysis becomes a practical media task in which students are asked to mock-up a poster for a film about their own life, which they then go on to make using digital photography and image-editing software. Students are asked to prepare for their individual photographs by bringing in an object to school that they feel in some way represents them, and to think specifically about what they are wearing, all of which serves as a gentle, early introduction to the notion of codes and representation. After students have each posed for their photographs (taken by me) they then use these to begin constructing their own coming-of-age film poster, in parallel with their personal writing. Students add further elements to their film poster and make further use of certain codes (font style, colour, layout and so on), as well as film poster conventions such as taglines, billing blocks and a film title. These final posters frequently prove useful in allowing me (Kerry) to gain an early sense of the different aptitudes within the class, both from students' latent understanding of creating meaning and from their practical skills with technology, which in itself tends to serve as a good marker for future film-editing work.

Overall, School of Media adopts a relatively holistic approach in its first year in certain key respects. Students attend School of Media for the same amount of time as students elsewhere in Larbert attend a standard S1 English class (four 50-minute periods per week). As such, there is not sufficient time to cover either a separate novel and film on their own respective terms, and teachers thus need to find ways of combining the two. To do so, School of Media teachers tend to choose novels with an existing film adaptation, allowing us to blend traditional literature study with film production and analysis skills. This then allows students to meet the literacy-based requirements (as relating to the Curriculum for Excellence's traditional English Es and Os) alongside media-focused activities related to the film adaptation. A few years ago, I (Kerry) chose *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (book, 1997; film, 2001) as the text I would work on with the class, focusing primarily upon the novel, while using the film adaptation both to supplement understandings of the novel and – elsewhere – to create opportunities for a focused approach to the film. We began with a focus on the novel, looking at traditional points of interest such as setting, plot and introducing character, as any other S1 English class might do. However, when we reached the 'Letters from no one' chapter, we paused our reading of the novel to take the opportunity

to focus on a film-based task. At this point in both the novel and the film, an abundance of letters arrive at the house of Harry's unpleasant adoptive parents, bursting from the fireplace and filling the living room. In the film adaptation, this scene is notable for its production design, and it thus provides an opportunity to explore the importance of paper-based prop-making for use on film sets. We discussed how and why all the letters in the scene required a certain aesthetic consistency (while also exploring the work of MinaLima, the company responsible for the graphic design across the Harry Potter franchise), and why it was important for all the letters to be handwritten and sealed with wax, as well as discussing the relationship between special effects and physical props. Each of the students then made their own letter, during a practical activity which focused in particular on the attention to detail required to create cinematic *mise en scène*, and the ways in which production design can convey both narrative detail and a sense of aesthetics (Figures 1–3).

More generally speaking, in the first year of School of Media, we seek to introduce key aspects of critical theory alongside whatever chosen text the class works on. In the first year in particular, we seek to cover key aspects of *content* – in terms of representation, categories, narratives and language – with the intention that, in the second year, we then move on to *context*, in terms of placing film and other media within wider understandings of society, history and politics. Much of the theory we seek to introduce in this respect with students during these first two years of School of Media is drawn from the Higher Media syllabus (conventionally studied by Scottish students in their fifth year of high school, but undertaken by School of Media's specialised students a year earlier), albeit simplified for younger learners. In this respect, while taking a broader, deeper approach to the study of film and media, School of Media also seeks to construct a secure pathway through which students can navigate their subsequent national-level qualifications. We therefore look to start introducing key concepts of later exam syllabuses into our

Figure 1. The prop-making process (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



Figure 2 and Figure 3. The finished prop letters (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



teaching right from the outset, introducing early aspects of theory that students will need in order later to sit their National 5 and Higher exams.

More holistically, however, this sort of approach also allows us the opportunity to introduce certain significant themes within the wider academic discipline of film studies very early in our students' engagement with film and other media, in particular aspects of narrative and genre theory, such as key concepts from Todorov (Todorov and Weinstein, 1969; Media-studies.com, 2021a), Roland Barthes (Barthes and Balzac, 1974; Felluga, 2011), Lévi-Strauss's concept of binary opposition (Lévi-Strauss, 1964; Bell and Johnson, 2018: 11), and Propp's character types (Propp, 1968; Media-studies.com, 2021b). While simplified, these aspects of theory are not 'dumbed-down', and those of us who teach in School of Media feel strongly about equipping our students with the knowledge they need to properly start thinking about films even at this early stage, both as carefully constructed texts and as works of art, rather than as something watched simply for entertainment. Simultaneously, while introducing our students to key aspects of theory early on in their time at School of Media, we also look to move quickly into practical film-making exercises that will help our students ground these aspects in practice. As we go on to discuss below, we have noticed that School of Media's approach, in integrating at an early stage aspects of theory (which are later required by the exam) with practical film-making exercises, pays significant dividends for our students' subsequent development as film-makers.

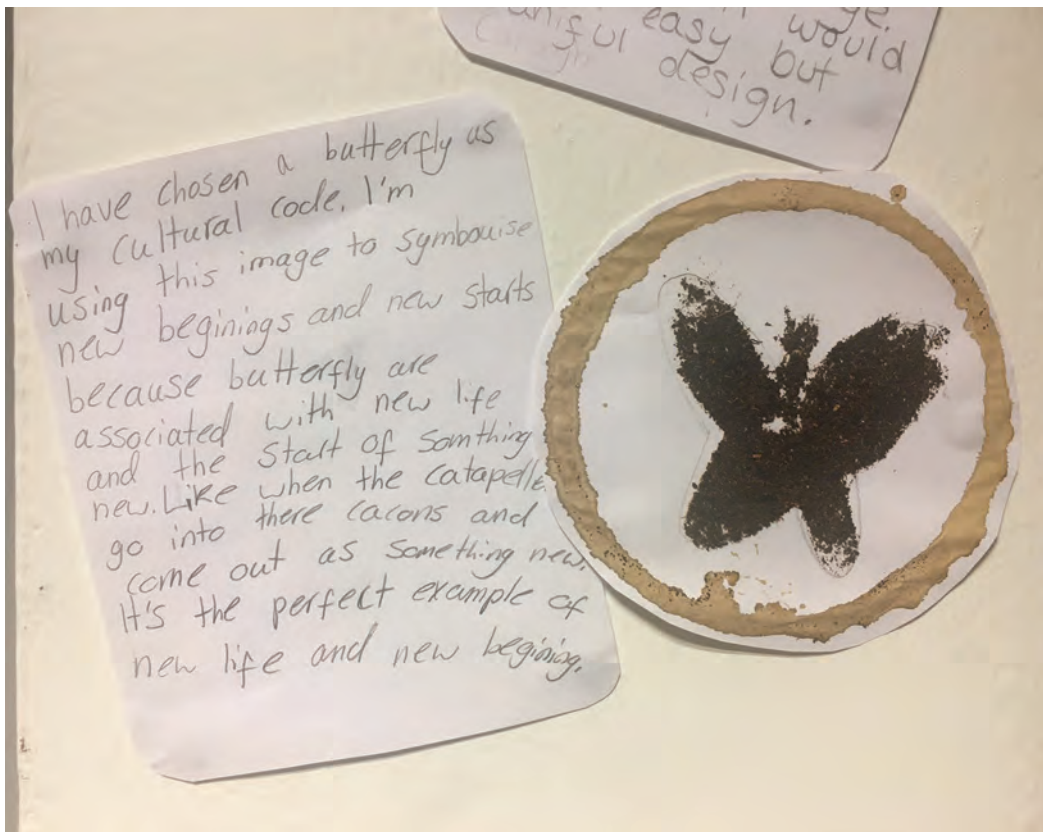
I (Kerry) sometimes feel that there is a misconception in Scotland that teaching film in high school involves superficial engagements with cinema, and the making of basic value judgements, whereas what we actually are doing right from the outset in School of Media is introducing students to basic semiotics, and fostering the ability to analyse how different aspects of a film cohere in order to communicate meaning. Alicia Vega (2020: 89) recently wrote in the pages of the *Film Education Journal* about how – with the right approach – even very young children can gain a basic grasp of semiotics:

Our first contact session with the children focuses on exploring what an image is. I usually take a blown-up photo of a hat and ask them to tell me what it is. They all shout aloud 'a hat'. Then, as if by magic, I bring out a top hat from a basket and ask them again if they can tell me what it is. 'A hat,' they reply in unison. When I ask them which of the two hats is the real one, they immediately realize that the former is only the image of a hat, whereas the latter is the real thing. Soon afterwards they try it on and walk around the classroom with it on their heads.

Similarly, within School of Media, teachers use basic objects as a means of helping students begin to realise the complex connotations they themselves already read into a simple object on screen, such as a rose, a crown or a cross. As well as gaining early understandings of semiotic theory, here our students are also starting to understand the intricacies of visual storytelling, and the profound connotations of even small visual decisions and details of *mise en scène* (Figure 4).

We also feel it is important to encourage students to bridge between the aspects of theory they are learning in class, and the films and television they are watching in their spare time. When exploring genre, for example, we encourage students to draw upon patterns they recognise from films with which they are familiar, for example, looking again at the Marvel franchise to extrapolate the conventions of the superhero genre, at Pixar to explore the conventions of children's films, or at Star Wars to develop understandings of science fiction. Here we are firmly of the conviction that designing tasks that place theory at their heart, but that are able to incorporate the important element of student choice, is a productive way both of helping students grasp core principles and of encouraging the ability to exemplify across a range of texts within and across genres. When we come to talk about Propp, we talk about the patterns that Propp (1968) identified in Russian fairy tales and folklore, and then apply these to whichever film or novel we are studying, in order to demonstrate that the same theories are still relevant for contemporary cinematic storytelling. Once students have learned Propp's (1968) eight character types, and have had lots of practice in class applying these to different examples, we then encourage students to apply the theory in their own time to a film they like. Encouraging students to recognise where and why these character types

Figure 4. Work on basic semiotics inspired by *Coraline* (Tim Burton, 2009) (source: Kerry Abercrombie)

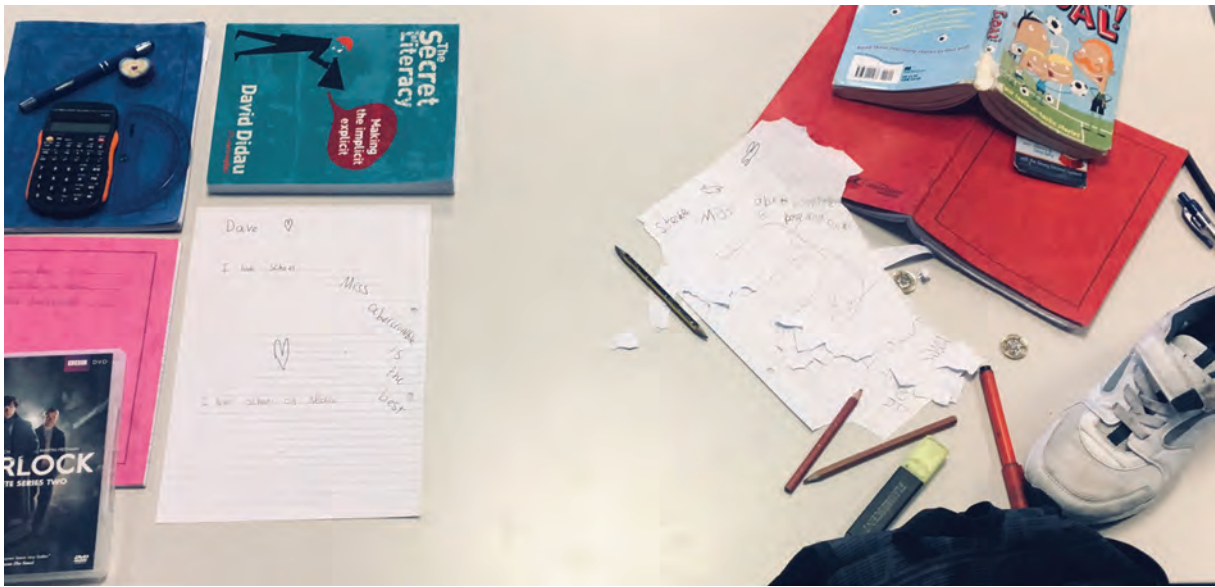


appear (or do not appear) across different sorts of narratives allows them to build on their understanding of film as a constructed art form. A key difference of doing work of this critical intensity with 11–12 year olds within School of Media is that our students have intentionally signed up to do it. Rather than waiting until these sorts of topics crop up in the media syllabus for National 5 or Higher, we are of the opinion that our students should be able to begin engaging with crucial questions of this sort right at the outset. Ultimately, it has also been my (Kerry's) experience that this sort of theoretical grounding means that, by the time our students are able to have an experience of making their own films, they come pre-equipped with a strong sense of how their choices – even regarding simple objects in the frame – convey certain meanings. In our experience, this integration of theory and practice ultimately equips our students to be more thoughtful film-makers, for practice gives them the opportunity to deepen their understandings of the theory they are exploring, and vice versa.

One of my (Kerry's) favourite first-year School of Media exercises focuses on production design and *mise en scène*, and the storytelling skills involved in helping an audience to identify *who* a character is, before they are fully revealed. I frequently ask our students, using only their desks and any other props they can find in the room, to create the contrasting impressions of a student who is very studious and industrious, alongside a more marginalised student who is not having such a good experience of school. The students are given four minutes to choose books, scribble notes and otherwise arrange their desks with a view to creating a strong sense of who these two characters are, without physically showing them (Figure 5).

In my experience, students tend to respond well to this, perhaps because it is focused on such a small area, and thus allows them to focus upon intricate details. The exercise also acts as a good point of departure for production design on a larger scale, learning to scale up while maintaining the same level of attention to detail, and in general across School of Media (as discussed below in relation to short film

Figure 5. An example of a 'set dressed' desk (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



work) we are mindful of approaching project briefs in such a way as to allow students to really focus their creative energies within a set of delineated parameters, rather than lose focus within an over-expansive brief. Returning to the desk exercise, students are then asked to take a photograph of their 'set', which is subsequently shared with the class in order for us to discuss together what elements of the character's personality and general situation can be gleaned solely from the set design. Using this exercise with a number of different classes, I have found that it can serve to illustrate the ways in which cultural codes do not exist in isolation, and I continue to be impressed by how students incorporate additional codes and further cultural and political references into their set design. A similar approach can then be applied to costume and uniform, using very practical, material means of conveying meaning to an audience.

Throughout the first year of School of Media, we seek further playful ways to help students explore aspects of theory. For example, when exploring Todorov's five-part narrative theory – (1) equilibrium; (2) disruption; (3) recognition; (4) repair the damage; and (5) return to the equilibrium (Todorov and Weinstein, 1969) – I (Kerry) have sometimes used an exercise whereby the class sits in five small groups, and one group write the initial 'equilibrium' stage of a narrative on a piece of paper, which is then folded over and passed on to the next group who write the 'disruption', and so on. This allows students to practise making decisions regarding each stage of a narrative, and to see aspects of the theory in action as it should unfold, while simultaneously allowing them to explore what happens when the sequence is altered or reordered. Similarly, when working with Propp's (1968) character types, we sometimes ask groups to come up with a film pitch, which is then coupled with a costume design task in which they are asked to invent costumes for each character based on the different character types, ensuring as they do so that each character has a defined role within the narrative they are pitching.

In terms of practical film-making work, we start in the first year of School of Media with short, 10-second pieces with very clearly set objectives, and then slowly build up the capacity to make longer pieces with a similar degree of focus. We have again learned from experience that if we were to ask our students to make films following relatively simplistic briefs too early in their time with School of Media, the consideration of craft and nuanced decision-making simply would not be there. Overall, we continue to find that teaching theory alongside small practical activities serving to underpin those theories allows us to see a clear sense of developing film-making craft in our students. We have found this to be most evidently manifest in the differences between those Larbert High students later taking Higher media who

have *not* been part of the School of Media cohort, and those from School of Media taking the exam a year earlier, in terms of the level of intentionality and detailed decision-making evident in their work.

In the second year of School of Media, we are able to separate out English and media teaching, meaning that our students receive four periods of English and three periods of media, the latter being wholly concentrated on School of Media activities without the need to simultaneously meet any English Es and Os. Having previously covered aspects of theory related to *content* in S1, we now move on to questions of *context*: social, institutional and audience-related. In doing so, however, we look to integrate these new considerations with the aspects of content-focused theory explored by students in S1.

Over time, we have arrived at an approach within School of Media whereby the four teachers working within the programme have full autonomy in terms of the films selected to work on with any given year group. While this approach is not unique to School of Media (individual control over choices of text is familiar, indeed expected, both in wider English teaching and aspects of expressive arts across Scotland), we have found that the ability to follow our own enthusiasms as teachers positively impacts upon our teaching, and also tends to mean there is a considerable degree of variety between the films selected to be taught by the four teachers working within the programme. My colleague Katie, like myself, studied film as an undergraduate (as part of a joint honours English and film degree), and channels this previous engagement with world film culture – in particular German Expressionism, horror cinema and the work of Akira Kurosawa – into her teaching. By comparison, our colleague Martin brings experience from teaching film and media at college level, as well as links with the film and television industry. Overall, this means that a student's experience of any given year of School of Media will differ depending on their teacher, and the films chosen as a focus. Recalling Alain Bergala's (2016: 38) discussions of the *passeur*, we argue that the benefit of this approach is that students will be taught by someone with a genuine passion for what they are teaching, who can hopefully pass on aspects of that enthusiasm and engagement with cinema to their students. To add a note of caution to celebrations of the *passeur*, however, at present many of the exercises detailed within this essay are formulated by us, the teachers within School of Media, working in a close collegiate fashion. With many media teachers and film education practitioners elsewhere in Scotland being more isolated, and working alone within departments, formulating approaches without a wider community to draw upon may present distinct challenges.

A film I recently used to explore such aspects of context with our S2 students was Bryan Singer's *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), which usefully serves as a point of departure for discussions of homophobia and racism in British society in the 1970s and 1980s. As Daly et al. (2020: 169) have explored elsewhere, film in this respect frequently provides a means of teaching social issues that can be much more energised and accessible for students than other media, thus creating inroads to topics that can be harder to access through other means of storytelling. In our experience with School of Media, the visual nature of film as a medium seems to have a considerable impact upon how seriously young people are willing to engage with certain forms of culture. For example, in the press conference scene in *Bohemian Rhapsody* when Freddie Mercury (Rami Malek) is being asked invasive questions about his sexuality rather than about his music, I found that the film's use of extreme close-ups and the flashing lights of camera bulbs seemed to create a notable impact upon our students. When I subsequently asked our students how this might be reflective of the attitudes towards the gay community at that time, students were able to speak in depth about what they had just seen and felt, and then to think imaginatively about the experience of being LGBTQ+ in the 1970s. Somehow, it seemed that the audiovisual aspects of what they had experienced were key, for, while students are able to develop imaginative empathies from reading a book, in our experience, there is something particularly immediate about the medium of film that allows them to imagine themselves more vividly into the experience of others.

During the second year of School of Media, we consciously adopt certain exercises that allow students to consolidate and develop the practical skills they learned in S1. In this respect *Bohemian Rhapsody* allowed us the opportunity to look again at the visual storytelling techniques with which characters are introduced in films, as the film deliberately does not show the protagonist's face during

Figure 6. Storyboard for an opening sequence (source: Kerry Abercrombie)

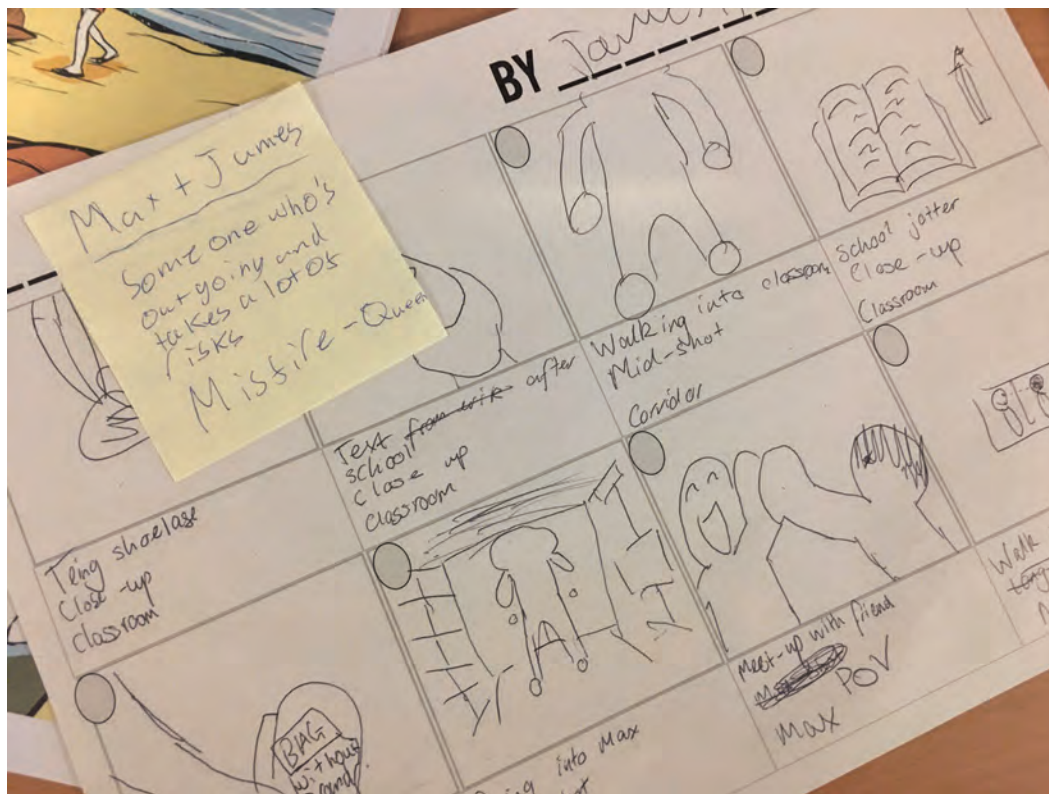


Figure 7(a) and Figure 7(b). Stills from finished sequences (source: Kerry Abercrombie)

A



B



its 3 minute 44 second opening sequence. Following a discussion of this sequence, students were then asked to construct their own opening sequences which delayed the reveal of the main character's face or hearing them speak. As such, the students – now in the capacity of film-makers – had to rely upon cultural codes alone to tell us something about who the character was (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

S3 and S4: National 5 and Higher (14–16 years old)

In their third and fourth years of School of Media, our students sit both their National 5 and Higher exams. Here, as teachers are required to follow the national curriculum for media studies as set out by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, there is less flexibility in School of Media's approach.

The Scottish National 5 Media qualification is focused on two assessed elements: a question paper sat under examination conditions, and an assignment completed throughout the year, which is then externally marked. At Larbert, while this assignment offers the option to make a fully realised short film, we tend to encourage students to focus on completing a storyboard as their final output. This is partially due to time constraints, having learned from broader experience (outside the School of Media) that, at National 5 level, students are often not able to complete a subsequent film based on these storyboards in time for the exam deadline. Larbert's approach to the National 5 is relatively standard in this respect, as the vast majority of centres use storyboards rather than films as their finished product. Due to their two years studying practical film-making techniques grounded in theory, our School of Media students are sometimes an exception in this respect, with this specialist experience (and often considerable willpower!) often putting them in a better position to complete a film project within the time frame. The National 5 assignment criteria ask students to demonstrate their ability to apply their knowledge, understanding and research within a final product, which they are subsequently able to evaluate and reflect critically upon. In this respect, storyboards allow students a degree of ability to move beyond the material resources to which they have access. Storyboards allow students to make use of the hypothetical, without having to worry about complex or resource-intensive aspects of film production. In this respect, the storyboard serves as a focused artefact through which students are able to demonstrate their learning.

While storyboarding thus has certain useful affordances as a medium, allowing students both to exercise their cinematic imaginations and to deploy wider understandings of theory, it could also be considered a relatively specialist activity that can sometimes prove difficult for students to fully engage with. In particular, it seems difficult to see how storyboards of this sort – based around a series of static images – might be able to incorporate a sense of movement, transition and edits between shots. Some of the less-developed work our students have submitted for this assignment over the years has made use of rudimentary stick men, and as Alain Bergala has discussed (Bergala, 2016: 108; Chambers, 2020: 153), storyboarding in this respect risks placing an overdue emphasis on students' skills in illustration and ability to draw, perhaps distracting from a medium-specific focus on cinema. While the standard of artistic ability is not an element graded as part of the Higher assignment, the fact remains that, at times, students' ability to communicate their intentions does rely, at least in part, on their ability to visualise an idea through two-dimensional illustration. Other solutions to this challenge used with National 5 candidates at Larbert have included the use of storyboarding software which, while making the aptitude for illustration less of an issue, is limited in other respects, as students are confined by the options available within the program. Neither asking students to rely on their ability to draw, nor the circumscribed digital option, would seem to address the root of the problem. It would thus seem that there is scope for additional supportive resources, either from the Scottish Qualifications Authority or otherwise, regarding how we might teach students the art of storyboarding and assist them in thinking beyond a series of static images towards more dynamic conceptions of cinema.

In Scotland, when students make the transition to Higher after their National 5 exams, there is a period between the end of May and before the summer holidays begin during which timetables change in anticipation of the coming school year. One of the broader challenges that Higher media faces as a subject more widely in Scottish schools at this point is a significant change in cohort. Media frequently seems to be viewed by students as a subject that can be relatively easily picked up in S6, as what is known as a 'crash' Higher. In these terms, however, it is equally easily dropped if a student finds that they need to resit a core subject, or receives a conditional offer from college or university that specifies a particular subject. As such, many media teachers find that the class in front of them during this pre-summer period can be wildly different in comparison with that when school returns in August. As a result, I (Kerry) have tried to take advantage of this liminal, in-between period in order to teach practical film-making skills, before the more formalised study towards Higher exams begins in the new school year. It is important to note that not all of our Higher media candidates at this point come from School of Media, and many are

thus totally new to film-making. Using this time to explore practical tasks before the more regimented study begins in the coming academic year therefore allows students the opportunity to explore and experiment hands-on with some of the concepts and technical elements they will later need to use during their Higher assignment work. One element that I (Kerry) particularly enjoy teaching during this period is lighting. Over the years, the department has built up a supply of different types of lights, ranging from practical everyday light sources such as torches, lamps and battery-operated candles to a small set of more professional lighting equipment, such as coloured bulbs, gels and mounted LED lighting packs. I also ask students to make their own bounce boards, making use of cardboard and tinfoil, in an attempt to instil a sense that film-making at this level requires the ability to work creatively and imaginatively with restricted resources (Figure 8). I often begin our explorations with light by demonstrating a three-point lighting set-up in a dark room, covering the basics of cinematic lighting in terms of high-key, low-key and back-lighting (Figure 9).

In doing so, I look to compare existing film stills with the on-the-ground, practical means needed to achieve particular lighting effects. We then split the class into groups, with each group being given their own light source and a pictographic list of different types of lighting to attempt to achieve. We make use of my classroom (in which I am fortunate enough to be able to create total blackout conditions), the school studio space and even a giant cupboard in which groups can play with the light and achieve different effects. Having captured these images, we then go on to discuss informally with the whole class about how they achieved each of the effects. This opportunity to experiment and be playful is crucial, because tasks of this nature allow students to begin to see how much preparation, consideration and care need to go into each element of film-making, while also allowing them to pick up some practical tips and ideas for those going on to work on longer projects at Higher level.

Figure 8. Making the bounce boards (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



Figure 9. Experimenting with lighting (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



In their subsequent fourth year of School of Media, our students have the option to go on to study for their national Higher examination (again, a year earlier than most other students in Scotland). Here, as one of their key assignments for the exam, students are expected to concretely instantiate their ideas, moving beyond the theoretical confines of a storyboard to working in real locations, within the real, concrete parameters of cinema. Within School of Media, this progression from storyboard to a fully fledged short film piece occurs more organically than it perhaps does for a sixth-year student taking media for the first time at Higher level.

When it comes to making these films, while there is certain guidance from the Scottish Qualifications Authority as to what must be outlined, we at Larbert adopt a relatively open approach to the assignment brief, in the hope of allowing students the scope to make a diverse variety of films. Here, the recurrent notion within School of Media that focusing on constituent parts of a film (rather than a film narrative in its entirety) allows students to focus upon their film-making craft frequently seems to lead to better results. While different teachers on the programme may set different briefs, School of Media as a whole asks students to focus on smaller sections of film, as opposed to a complete narrative. I (Kerry), for example, usually choose to focus on an opening sequence, whereas other colleagues give the option of any sequence from a student's overall conception of a film. Reducing the finished product to one specific sequence or section of film in this way allows students to engage specifically with, for example, a particular stage of the narrative, a character introduction (recalling their work in first and second years) or establishing a sense of place, while also allowing them to explore the specific technical elements tailored to their choice of sequence, such as editing pace, music and lighting.

While perhaps less satisfying than producing a film with an entire narrative arc, this tight focus again allows students to engage in detail with the minutiae of film production without the potentially overwhelming demands of making a full short film. For example, a student's work from 2018/19, entitled 'Radical', consisted of three characters introduced within an opening sequence. With three bedroom sets

Figure 10. Still from 'Radical' (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



to dress, three costumes to create and three shoots with individual characters to juggle (all with 1980s' period markers to consider), the candidate was able to give each of these tasks careful attention without the shooting schedule becoming beholden to plot (Figure 10).

Recalling School of Media's introduction to basic semiotics early on, this approach allows students to focus on developing meaning through technical and cultural codes, rather than narrative arc being the key factor motivating their creativity. Given that many students' primary reference points within the research for these assignments reflects their own cultural consumption, feature-length films tend to dominate their thinking. This is also reflected in the sort of film 'texts' studied for the more formal written examination section of the Higher qualification. Short film, while remaining a valid choice for both practical assignment and written examination, has its own set of conventions and markers, with which – in our experience – many students are significantly less familiar. Asking for a sequence from a feature-length film idea thus tends to be much more within students' realm of familiarity than asking for a fully crafted short film.

Another approach we take towards Higher practical assignments is actively encouraging young people to shoot their films in their own time, while completing their edits in class time. This allows more scope for students' film shoots to happen in real locations with actors better suited to convey their narratives. Within School of Media, this often means that film productions become a family affair, with many students choosing to use their own homes (or those of friends and family) as locations, and their own parents or younger siblings as age-appropriate actors. During the 2018/19 school year, our inaugural School of Media class went through Higher for the first time. Here, after almost four years of their children being involved in the programme, we received feedback that parents were delighted to finally have the opportunity to feature in some of their children's creative output! In one particular Higher production – 'Just Business' – a student's father was cast as a businessman who worked in Glasgow. During the shoot for the film, the student asked their father to drive to a particular office building in Glasgow that they had picked for its stylistic, aesthetic qualities. They then asked their father to drive a certain route they had planned, out of Glasgow, during a scene in which the character their father was playing drove home at the end of the day. The student's intention was to show the character's transition from businessman to family man, and the route thus moved from more built-up areas of Glasgow into increasingly suburban

environments. The student's father later recounted to us how he drove to Glasgow and repeated the same route three times, in order to allow his child to shoot him from three different angles, in order to bring sufficient variety to the edit! During the production for another film, a student's entire family unit climbed a local range of hills in order to help the student achieve an extreme long shot of their main character walking into the wilderness. Here the family both acted in, and assisted with, the production, and – as in many cases across School of Media – the student's parents later expressed to us how impressed they were with the focus and determination of their children as directors, and how being involved in these productions allowed them to see sides of their child they had not seen before (Figures 11, 12 and 13).

Figures 11, 12 and 13. Selection of stills from Higher films (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



Figures 11, 12 and 13. Continued


For the most part, School of Media students use their own mobile devices in order to perform the practical work throughout their time on the programme, and their work for Higher assignments is no exception. Access to equipment is frequently a topic of much debate and discussion for those teaching practical film-making in schools. It is often a key point of contention whether the onus should be on the school to provide students with more specialist equipment, or whether students should use whatever is readily available to them. In my (Kerry's) experience, it is always better to encourage students to use equipment already in their possession, and with which they therefore have a sense of agency. This is particularly the case because this sort of equipment tends to be much more current in terms of image quality than that which Scottish schools are likely to be able to procure and maintain. We do recognise, however, that for various reasons students may need to borrow equipment. At Larbert, while we have iPads in each media classroom, as well as a few DSLR cameras, these are mainly reserved for students whose mobile devices are not quite of the standard needed to produce images of sufficient quality. In general, however, we find that most of our students have their own devices, and – beyond the question of technological affordances – if they become used to using their own equipment, it frees them up both in terms of the scope of the films they are making for their assignment, and in terms of extending their film-making interests beyond their curricular work. The level of activity detailed in the previous paragraph, for example, would only be possible for students using their own equipment, rather than those using school equipment, which would require them to film within school grounds. Within School of Media, our approach to equipment is reflective of our wider make-do, lo-fi approach to practical film-making. As is the case with many Scottish schools, the small budget (to the extent that it exists at all) for media leads to an environment where our students are encouraged to become resourceful in developing creative solutions.

S5 and S6: Wider Achievement Opportunities (16–18 years old)

In their final two years of school, there is space within each student's timetable to choose to participate in one of a series of what Larbert calls Wider Achievement Opportunities (WAO). Within the Scottish secondary curriculum, when the periods students are assigned for certain levels and subjects are

accounted for, two periods in the timetable are left over. Different schools approach these two spare periods in different ways and with different names (see the discussion in Daly et al. (2020: 172) about how these periods have been used to explore film elsewhere in Scotland, as part of what John Paul Academy calls its 'Wider Certification' programme), but often they are used to try to equip students with some aspects of vocationally focused learning, skills or experience for their time beyond secondary education. At Larbert High, the WAOs offered by the media department, not only for School of Media students but also for the wider student body, are film-making and journalism.

The film-making WAO offers students practical film-making skills and the creative freedom to make films. Having been in more formal, curriculum-driven programmes of learning at National 5 and Higher, School of Media students who take this option now get the space to create something that they themselves want to make, albeit incorporated into class time. Given this freedom from exams, there is more scope for both students and teachers to take an exploratory approach, and to try out cross-curricular collaborations with other parts of the school. Run by my (Kerry's) colleague Katie Cooper, the film-making WAO explores practical aspects of film-making such as lighting, shot types and camera angles, *mise en scène*, dressing a set, editing and music, all using hands-on practical tasks. Alongside these activities, students have the chance to work on a film-making project of their own choice, and they are supported in putting this through production. The WAO also creates opportunities to be involved in film-making competitions and wider aspects of community work, with previous participants working alongside peers and colleagues from Larbert's expressive arts faculty on a mixed-media project for NHS Forth Valley.

Elsewhere, the journalism WAO run by School of Media – while print- and web-based – also creates opportunities for students to explore and develop their skills in film criticism within Larbert's school newspaper, *The Scope*. With a regular column on film recommendations, which are often thematically curated by the students, and a film review section in which *Scope* students work to select and edit film reviews from our Into Film Club, the journalism WAO is shaped by the interests and passions of the students themselves (Figures 14 and 15). Within the WAO, we have also previously explored video articles and essays scripted, presented and produced by a small team of enthusiastic students on topics such as 'Monopolies in the film industry' and 'The Bechdel test: Is it actually a feminist benchmark?'

Beyond School of Media

As their time at school draws to a close, and the inaugural School of Media class engage in securing further education opportunities and making plans to enter the world of work, this would seem an opportune moment for their teachers to reflect upon the experiences of the past six years. Being able to see some of the longer-term implications for students of being involved in a specialised pathway such as School of Media throughout their time at secondary school allows us to take stock of areas for improvement, while celebrating some of the programme's achievements. While the School of Media has undoubtedly cemented the status of media as a subject within the broader structure of the curriculum, it is the contention of the authors – returning to the spirit with which this article started – that there is still a significant amount of work to be done. One particular challenge facing teachers on the School of Media programme is how to maintain the high-quality experiences of our specialist students within School of Media while balancing this specialist pathway alongside opportunities for other Larbert students wishing to enter the subject area later in their school career. As the programme continues, questions of sustainability, with regard to teacher skill and knowledge in the field, are raised.

Recalling Daly et al.'s (2020: 168) discussion of the lack of formal training for teachers seeking to teach film, we would conclude by arguing that there is a growing need for more formal provision for film education as part of teacher training programmes, or, perhaps, opportunities for formal qualifications for those who have already embarked upon a career in teaching – such as Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh has begun to offer, in tandem with Screen Scotland's Film Education team, through their Professional Practice in Film Education course, which I (Kerry) helped to develop (Queen Margaret

University, 2021). Film is a subject that requires specialist knowledge, and there is sometimes a danger that film education in school settings is driven by enthusiasm rather than expertise. School of Media has been allowed to thrive due to a serendipitous group of appropriately qualified specialists gathered in the same place, sharing common enthusiasms and a common purpose. In this respect, other schools may not be so fortunate. Overall, we therefore argue that classroom-based film education in Scotland requires a greater degree of specialist support for teachers, perhaps best located within formal teacher training

Figures 14 and 15. *The Scope* (source: Kerry Abercrombie)



Figures 14 and 15. Continued

Film Picks: Summer Classics

Vania Martin looks at three classics across the decades you should watch this summer.

Roman Holiday (1953)



When touring European princess, Ann (Audrey Hepburn), runs away from her suffocating lifestyle for the night, she runs into journalist, Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck). All he wants is an exclusive scoop about the princess' life to keep his job, but soon romance gets in the way. Roman Holiday will most definitely want to make you run out and buy a Vespa once you see Hepburn having the time of her life as a sheltered princess on the streets of Rome, falling in love with the simplistic lifestyle she's never had. If you want the slow, summer romance that is elegant and beautiful, then this is your summer flick.

Dirty Dancing (1987)



Spending the summer at Kellerman's family resort, Frances "Baby" Houseman (Jennifer Grey), on the road to joining the Peace Corps and marrying a doctor, falls for the camp's leather-wearing, window-smashing dance instructor Johnny Castle (Patrick Swayze). Dirty Dancing is the summer feel-good, loved by many for its classic lines and sweet romantic storyline. Get ready to spend the movie wanting Johnny and Baby's relationship to be accepted by her father, singing along to the popular soundtrack and shouting "nobody puts Baby in the corner" along with Patrick Swayze at the end. Don't even get me started on the lift at the end - the symbol of the entire movie. If you want magic and love and music, this is the movie for you.

Dazed and Confused (1993)



The last day of school in a small town in Texas brings about the classic 70's feelings of getting drunk, stoned or laid - even for the football players who promised not to, and the freshman who aren't supposed to. Dazed and Confused gives you the true insight of the 70's summer days, where pot and beer finds its way into the hands of the teenagers all the time without the knowledge of their parents. It's a feel good, for definite, with a perfect 70's soundtrack, stupid jokes and teenagers being presented as real teenagers. If you want to laugh your way through a movie with Matthew McConaughey with the blondest moustache and Ben Affleck with the worst sideburns, you need to watch this movie.

Film Picks: Coming in 2019

Vania Martin looks at 2019's most hotly anticipated future blockbusters.

Captain Marvel



When a war breaks out between two alien races and the Earth is caught in the crossfire, Carol Danvers, played by Brie Larson, becomes the Universe's most powerful hero. Captain Marvel, the character, is super strong, can actually fly and can both absorb and project energy due to the mixing of her human and alien DNA. This feminist masterpiece will be released on March 8th 2019, which many have said is the perfect date for such a movie as this is also International Women's Day. Two trailers and multiple movie posters have allowed us to see Larson in all her Captain Marvel finery. Get your super suit on, because, honey, our nights are in danger... and we're loving it!

Toy Story 4



We were left saying goodbye to Andy at the end of Toy Story 3 and it seems as if we might be saying goodbye to some of our favourite toys at the end of Toy Story 4, if the posters are anything to go by. We don't know much about the storyline but we do know that Bonnie, the toys' new owner, buys herself a new toy, 'Forky'. This leads to an adventurous road trip that allows Woody to see just how big the world actually is for a toy. This long awaited fourth movie of the much loved Pixar franchise will be released on the 21st of June 2019 in both the U.K and U.S. So grab your tissues and get those snakes out of your boot as we get ready to sing 'You've Got A Friend In Me' for the last time.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood



You've not seen a cast this big since Ocean's Eleven. Here we welcome a movie about a faded TV actor and his stunt double embarking on a journey to make a name for themselves during the Helter Skelter reign of the Manson family during 1969. Just to name drop some of the big actors taking on big roles in this based-on-true-events blockbuster, Margot Robbie, Kurt Russell, Leonardo DiCaprio, Tim Roth, Al Pacino, Dakota Fanning and best of all it's written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. This comedy-drama will be released in the U.K on the 26th of July 2019 and true to Tarantino's word, it will be full of blood, guts and gore. So bloody up and prepare yourself for the biggest movie of the new year.

Film Picks: A trio of fright delights

Vania Martin takes us through some films for getting into the Halloween spirit.

Kids To Get In The Guising Spirit: Halloweenown (1998) PG



A family friendly movie about a girl who finds out that she's a witch on her thirteenth birthday. On Halloween, Marnie Piper follows her grandmother to Halloweenown with her siblings and saves the supernatural-filled city from their mayor, Kalabar, who starts freezing the townsfolk so that he can take the town over. It's a Disney Channel Original Movie so expect kids not following the rules, jokes so bad they're funny (all told by a talking skeleton who drives a cab) and that happy ending that we all expect and love. It's corny, a little cheap, but it's fun and spooky enough for the kids, and above all, it involves witches. Come on, what's more Halloween than witches? Nothing!

Teens Wishing To Sleep With The Lights On: The Conjuring (2013) 15



A frightening true story about married paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren. In 1971, they are called on to help the Perrons who have just moved into a dilapidated Rhode Island farmhouse which has a very high percentage of celestial disturbance and scary going-ons. The Warrens have to call upon all the skills and strength that they have to defeat this haunting menace from destroying everyone involved. It's a nail-biting, hiding-behind-a-pillow movie which got its R rating from fear alone, no need for blood or gore. It's tense, it's horrifying, it'll make you know the true meaning of horror. You'll never find a 21st Century horror movie quite as good at suspense and terror. For Adults Who Can't Go Asking For Sweets: Scream (1996) 18



A gory classic about the murdering of high school teenagers by a masked killer. Fear and rumours start to rise in a peaceful Californian town after the anonymous killer guts two high school lovers. When he begins to kill high school teenager, a dramatic cop, a teenage girl and an ambitious reporter start to investigate the murders. It's suspenseful, clever and full of guts and gore. The definition of horror slasher. Scream is iconic and unique with a wonderful cast and an amazing script. The perfect horror movie for Halloween night.

programmes. This is needed in particular in order to challenge current dominant narratives about the value of film in education, and in order to empower teachers to view media as a distinct subject, and film education in particular as a specialist area of value. Following Daly et al. (2020), we argue that one of the most powerful solutions to this ongoing debate is to equip and empower teachers themselves to make these changes, rather than relying upon the work of well-meaning external organisations.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with Edinburgh College of Art standards.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

A co-author is a current Editor for this journal. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Bohemian Rhapsody (GB/US 2018, Bryan Singer)

Coraline (US 2009, Tim Burton)

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (GB/US 2001, Chris Columbus)

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