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Reviewing "Filmic Pedagogies": Student Perceptions of Film Review Assignments in Higher Education – An Example from the UK

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Abstract: "Filmic pedagogies" describes the increasing use of film, media, and cultural products for teaching, learning, and assessment across a diverse range of academic undergraduate programs. Focusing on a UK-based undergraduate Education Studies degree program, this article considers film reviews as a way to explore issues around youth. Based on focus group interviews with 24 final-year undergraduates, the article considers students' experiences and perceptions of the process of engaging with films in learning, teaching, and assessment. Offering insights into how film reviews motivate students' engagement in assignments, this article considers students' perceptions of the contribution that film reviews can make to graduate outcomes and key labor market skills, expanding professional knowledge bases and developing critical media literacy. In doing so, the article discusses the value and challenges of designing learning, teaching, and assessment techniques that are relevant and relatable to students and offer autonomy and choice, across a range of cultures and countries.

Keywords: education studies, pedagogy, filmic pedagogies, youth, assignment

1. Introduction

1.1. Filmic pedagogies

Contemporary societies across the globe are increasingly media saturated [1, 2], and "visual images are becoming a primary means of information presentation" [3]. Accelerated as a result of online teaching arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, internationally, there is a proliferation of engagement with visual resources to support and enhance learning in higher education (hereafter HE), including user-generated content (such as YouTube and other vlog sites), documentaries (such as TED talks), cartoons, and, of interest to this article, films [4]. Arguably, an increased focus on visual media in education goes some way to resolving the contradiction between the dominance of print media in classrooms and the pre-eminence of visual media in everyday life [5, 6].

Over the last 15 years (though perhaps less so more recently), there has been a growing body of evidence discussing "filmic pedagogies" [7], that is, the use of films in learning, teaching, and assessment within a range of educational settings, including primary and secondary schools and higher education across the globe [8, 9]. As a concept, filmic pedagogies have been discussed in relation to a range of subjects and disciplines, including history [7], public relations [10], business and accounting [11, 12], psychology [13], health education [8, 14], and teacher training [3].

Films are powerful cultural products [7] and can be produced, watched, analyzed, and interpreted in a range of ways [15–17]. Although often seen solely as entertainment or escapism, films are also a form of public pedagogy [1]. Films explore, promote, legitimize, challenge, and contest images, identities, stereotypes, ideologies, and perspectives [4–6, 17, 18]. Therefore, media literacy education, which is a set of practices that equips individuals to identify, read, analyze, and evaluate messages and intent in a range of forms, is increasingly important within the learning process [9], helping to enable graduate outcomes linking to participation in the labor market and broader contemporary society [2, 19].

Irrespective of the subject, films are a useful tool to help teachers reach their educational objectives and a plethora of analytical procedures draw upon a breadth of sociological, psychological, semiotic, cultural, and technical perspectives [11, 12, 15]. The educational value of films for teaching and learning depends upon the mode of delivery and the forms of engagement [10, 13]. Most forms utilize different strategies of active learning (a technique favored in many though not all cultures), ranging from free, unstructured, or guided in-class discussion [11], structured activities such as worksheets [7], or guided questions [13].

That films are in a readily available, familiar, multi-sensorial, memorable format associated with entertainment and escapism and an integral part of youth culture [7, 11] makes many students eager to view films and participate in discussions around them. Students value these active forms of filmic pedagogies – research indicates they enjoy viewing and analyzing films in class and report being more attentive and focused in comparison with other teaching strategies [10], leading to greater student participation and engagement [12, 13] and learning [20]. Films can "enliven" classes and increase student interest, curiosity, and engagement [10, 20], as film viewing is seen by students as "fun" [11, 14]. However, research also highlights how educators caution against

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seeing films as simple entertainment for students or a reward for good behavior [7] and that the role of films in teaching and learning goes (and should go) beyond enjoyment [1, 13, 17].

Irrespective of the discipline, films foster the development of a greater understanding and appreciation of subject-specialist knowledge [10] and provide ways to explore values and attitudes [8]. Although students can make connections with their own lives and those of others, there is particular value when films enable students to explore issues beyond their own everyday routine or horizons [11] and enable students to develop empathy with characters and their circumstances and challenges [4, 10, 14].

Films are also a useful and engaging way to critically consider issues around representation and difference [4, 7] and to engage students from diverse backgrounds [10]. As well as offering an ever-increasing range of contexts, storylines, and characters that challenge and contest existing representations and forms of discrimination, films can themselves also be critiqued for reinforcing inequality [2], for example, through heteronormative storytelling [9], racist and Islamophobic representations [4], and sexist and patriarchal portrayals and stereotypes [21].

While filmic pedagogies can nurture greater knowledge and understanding, films are also effective ways to develop analytical and interpretive skills [7, 8, 11]. Films enable students to connect and apply abstract, theoretical concepts, and processes with personal experience and real life [10, 11, 20]. Film analysis enables students to make their own decisions about identifying issues and applying theories, enabling deeper learning [10]. In addition, films enable the exploration of real-life scenarios useful for subject-specific professional development [10]. Films can also support critical pedagogies, enabling students to become critical agents [1], and therefore can be seen as a potentially transformative pedagogy [2].

However, key practical challenges have been identified with using films in the classroom. Donnelly [7] reports that filmic pedagogies can be viewed with suspicion by other colleagues. Using films in teaching can be time-consuming and difficult to organize and at the mercy of practical technical issues [1]. Moreover, film analysis (particularly for students not in media and film-related degree programs) can be difficult to grasp [10, 12, 20] – it takes time in the classroom to help support students in developing the skills to work with and analyze visual media [3]. The use of films does not always reflect different cultures' ways of learning and pedagogical approaches. Film analysis works best with constant adaptation and flexibility from the teacher, for example, in terms of choice of film, active learning focused on class activities such as discussions, and making sure that students have access to materials [4, 11].

This article contributes to existing debates in two key ways. First, while there is a substantial research base exploring filmic pedagogies as planned and experienced in relation to classroom teaching and learning, there is much less discussion of using film analysis as an assignment and whether and how film-based learning and assessment strategies impact learning and achievement [20]. To this end, this article explores student perceptions of film-based assignments and students' views about its impact on their learning and professional development.

Second, while the use of films has been discussed in relation to a number of different academic disciplines, there is very little discussion about using films to explore issues around youth. Youth Studies has long been a feature of a range of HE degree programs in the UK and elsewhere, including academic degrees, such as sociology, education studies, human geography, and psychology, and professional courses such as youth work, social work, and teacher training. "Youth Studies" is characterized by its diversity on several fronts. First, there is the recognition that youth itself is a contested, debatable concept [22, 23]. Second, there is a broad range of academic disciplines that constitute Youth Studies (sociology, human geography, psychology, education, and criminology to name a few) [24]. Third, each individual degree program draws upon and explores Youth Studies in a distinct manner, each with its own focus, content, and purpose. Despite this diversity, "Youth Studies" maps historical changes in experiences and expectations around youth [24]; makes visible youth culture and young people's everyday lives, considering difference, equality, diversity, and inclusion [25]; explores the challenges and tensions around youth transitions [26]; critiques policy contexts surrounding youth [22]; and recognizes young people's agency and advocates for change [24]. Films are an integral part of youth culture [7], and indeed young people are often portrayed as "digital natives" (a term not without problem or critique) [27] who display familiarity with (and some suggest possess an effortless critical expertise to engage with) contemporary forms of media, including films. However, despite research exploring filmic pedagogies throughout a number of disciplines, no published research has yet considered the role of films within teaching, learning, and assessment relating to Youth Studies or an Education Studies program. This article seeks to contribute to filling these two gaps by exploring a film review assignment on a UK undergraduate degree program.

1.2. Filmic pedagogies in a Youth Studies module

While each academic discipline offers distinct approaches to film analysis [15], the film review assignment forming the basis of this article is a sociological analysis – one less focused on the film's technical production and more on the stories, issues, and situations featured [21]. This approach draws upon Giroux's [1] pedagogical stance of "interpreting films as a serious object of social, political and cultural analysis." The film review discussed here is part of a final-year undergraduate "Youth Studies" module on an Education Studies program at Middlesex University. Located in London, UK, the university (and the course forming the basis of this article) has a very diverse student body (in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic profile) [28]. The "Youth Studies" module ran in different forms between 2015 and 2024 (led by the author from 2016 to 2024) and was scaffolded within key concepts drawn from the module such as youth identity, youth (sub)culture, generations, agency, and transitions [22].

In order to increase motivation and make the task more meaningful and relevant [4, 11], students were able to choose their own film to review and were encouraged to consider a diverse range, from historical dramas to contemporary films, across a variety of countries and genres, and in a range of languages. Reflecting the centrality of the streaming age in contemporary Western societies, students were also able to choose a serialized TV program since these offer (in a manner similar to films) an in-depth, developing story with complex characters, narratives, and situations [1, 16, 18]. For the rest of the article, the generic term "film review" also refers to instances where students chose to review a serialized TV program. Similarly, students were given the freedom to identify the issues or themes within the film that they wanted to explore [4, 11, 21] and to make their own creative connections between the film and theories/concepts explored in class. This autonomy was complemented through in-depth support for students, scaffolding the learning process throughout the duration of the assignment. Two film viewings in

class were each followed first by student-centered discussions of possible themes, theories, and concepts [11] and second by a lecturer-led example of how the two films could be analyzed. Other forms of support, such as tutorials, drop-in support sessions, and informal conversations in class, were available throughout the term, each embracing Giroux's [1] notion that such dialogue should not be restrictive, containing or imposing, but encourage students to explore and develop their own interests, embrace the controversy that films sometimes raise, and make their own creative links between film and theory, concepts, and literature. This process culminated in a 2500-word, individually written film review.

2. Method

Although a complex and contested term, "student voice" and an associated range of student consultation processes aiming to ensure students' participation in educational evaluation and development are key features of the contemporary HE landscape, both in the UK and elsewhere across the globe [29]. Therefore, any meaningful consideration of the role of films within HE teaching, learning, and assessment needs to explore students' own views and experiences.

Research grounded within student perceptions has become a legitimate, valid, and popular approach to research across a range of educational interests, including research focusing on students' perceptions of being consumers [30], online learning, distance education, and the emergence of innovation in teaching and learning [31, 32]. While an approach based on student perceptions cannot objectively measure the impact of film-based learning (indeed arguably the complex and multilayered nature of learning prevents an objective assessment of how one assignment impacts student performance), this qualitative methodological approach offers clear strengths in grounding research in the human experience [33]. In doing so, this approach can elicit in-depth, detailed, and meaningful accounts from students themselves about their learning [10, 14]. These strengths, plus the established body of research successfully using this approach, help to justify the adoption of a qualitative approach to consider students' perspectives toward using films in the classroom and as an assignment.

Focus groups have been used successfully in research with students [10, 34] and with research exploring films [14, 17]. Used in this project since they offer a naturalistic, relaxed environment for discussion and debate [34, 35], focus groups were facilitated by the researcher and author of this article, who has led the module for the past 7 years. There were four waves of recruitment, during the Spring term of each academic year from 2020 to 2023, following the submission of the film review assignment at the end of the Autumn term. All students who had completed the assignment were invited to take part. Over the four years of recruitment, 24 students (out of approximately 120 students who had taken the module during that time) agreed to take part. Although a self-selecting sample might only inspire those with more vocal views to participate, a diverse range of students (in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic profile) participated. Nine focus groups were undertaken, lasting between 15 and 60 min. The focus groups were mostly held face-to-face on campus, though online in 2021 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants were more than willing to discuss their experiences – minimal facilitation was required by the researcher, only occasionally gently asking those who were less vocal to share their views.

Although students are adults and able to give informed consent, student-focused research conducted by university staff raises complex ethical issues [36–38]. The research project was informed by British Educational Research Association guidance [39], and research ethics approval was given by the relevant university research ethics committee[1]. Issues of informed consent are particularly complex around student-lecturer research [40], and in this case, the researcher was in a position of relative power vis-à-vis students [37, 38]. To avoid any potential coercion to participate [41], student recruitment was low-key, comprising one group email to the entire student cohort and one brief verbal discussion about the project to each group in class. Invitations were only sent out after the film review assignment had been marked and returned (at the beginning of the Spring term), to help avoid students thinking that their decision to participate, or the content of the discussion, might impact their assignment grade [36, 40]. Written consent was obtained prior to the start of each focus group. Students were granted anonymity and confidentiality, with two important expectations. First, students were advised in advance that the disclosure of information that placed a participant or others at risk of significant harm [39] would not be kept confidential – an unlikely but not impossible scenario, given that film reviews sometimes touched on sensitive or controversial topics (though no such disclosures occurred). Second, confidentiality in focus groups can never be entirely assured, as each participant has the potential to breach these expectations [35] – though ground rules at the start of the interview requested each participant keep confidential the content of the discussion. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article, alongside the actual film that the student chose to review.

The audio files from the focus group interviews were transcribed, and data analysis followed a thematic approach based on emerging themes [33, 42]. A focus on emerging themes enables research to identify and explore issues of interest and relevance for the population taking part in the research [42]. In order to achieve this, the transcripts were read a number of times – initially, for familiarization, then for the open generation of preliminary codes that highlighted main ideas [17], and subsequently, a more formal process of coding that allowed for the identification, categorization, and comparison of common emerging themes [34, 42]. Three emerging themes (around ownership and autonomy, support, and evaluation) were identified – each of the three themes are presented and discussed within the three following findings sections. Each of these three main themes comprised a number of subthemes, which are listed at the beginning of each findings section. However, in order to reflect a more holistic, human-focused, in-depth qualitative approach [34], these subthemes are integrated together to create more discursive, narrative findings sections, rather than presented discretely. Since the data was collected over a number of years, at each phase of data collection, the existing data was re-analyzed in relation to the new data, providing several opportunities for new themes to emerge over the years.

One of the striking features of the data analysis in general was the consensus of responses – perceptions of the assignment were remarkably positive and consistent (reflecting that the assignment and module were rated very highly in end-of-year evaluations). While broadly speaking there was a lack of disagreement among those taking part in the research, careful attention has been paid in the data analysis (and in the findings sections below) to highlight

[1]Middlesex University Education Research Ethics Committee, No 11221.

where there was a lack of consensus from participants, where respondents were critical about the assignments, or where participants' accounts can be analyzed in different ways. Furthermore, the analysis is cautious about why the research had a general lack of range of divergent experiences – despite reassurances to students discussed above, they may well have been reluctant to be critical of the assignment, or this may indicate the presence of the well-known Hawthorne effect [41]. Accordingly, the discussion highlights where the debate must be cautious about the results and raises additional points in particular places to more critically consider certain findings. In doing so, the analysis focuses less on the simplistic question as to whether filmic pedagogies are valuable and "successful" and more on the complex, nuanced challenges around developing this particular type of assignment to support students' learning and assessment.

3. Choosing Films: "Ownership" and Autonomy

The first thematic category emerging from the transcripts relates to student discussions around choosing a film. Within this, several subthemes were identified, relating to excitement; challenges; relevance, relatability, and experience; and autonomy and control. Each is now discussed in turn.

When first introduced to the film review assignment, many participants discussed their excitement:

> I was intrigued, it's something not ordinary, something different to writing an essay or report. (Jaasira, Get Rich or Die Tryin')

This quote offers two powerful insights. First, it is the first (but not only) quote presented here that reflects a positive, affective response to finding out about the film review. Second, it offers a critical comparison of the film review with other "traditional" forms of assignments in HE, particularly essays. The quote here reflects other research exploring filmic pedagogies, exploring how films can be powerful motivations for studying, and reflecting how the students were keen "spectators of films" [12, 16].

However, while the vast majority of participants said they enjoyed films, this was not the case for all – out of the 24 participants, two explicitly stated that they did not enjoy films, as one explained:

> I don't like watching films . . . as I'm too impatient to find out what's going to happen. I want to know from the start. I could sit there for two hours, waiting. I'm just not patient enough. (Pandora, The Hate U Give)

The participant's account (however much in a minority in the case of this research) is important in acting as a reminder that no one assignment will ever be popular among all students [11, 43] and that teachers must continually ensure a diverse range of engaging and interesting strategies in the classroom.

Despite the initial excitement from most students, many participants stated that they experienced fear or apprehension about the assignment:

> I was a bit apprehensive to be honest, because . . . I know with an essay once I get in the flow of it but when it's not an essay. it's a bit "Am I going to be able to figure it out?" (Vicky, Kidulthood)

> Breakfast Club stood out – I've seen it so many times, but I've never looked at in that way before, I've never analysed it so for me that was quite a good choice to make. (Calisto)

These comments reflect findings from existing literature that note students can be more apprehensive about nontraditional forms of assignments [44]. Due to the vast number of films and serialized TV programs immediately accessible via streaming platforms [16], it was perhaps not surprising that many students described the process of choosing a film to review as challenging. Some students simply chose films that they were familiar with and enjoyed.

Two important, if differing, interpretations can be made from the above two quotes. First, these quotes can be seen to reflect how, within contemporary culture, films are associated with enjoyment, fun, and escapism [7, 11]. These quotes indicate how films can be seen as the basis for "accessible" assignments.

However, the quotes may also offer an important contribution to exploring some of the more complex challenges of filmic pedagogies – in that, given the prevalence of film within everyday culture, it may not be straightforward for students to choose their film – in the context of a universal media such as film, "choice" is not easy. Moreover, few students chose a film simply because it was fun (lengthy justifications are provided below), reflecting Marquis et al. [17] and others' findings from those exploring filmic pedagogies [1, 13], indicating that using films in teaching, learning, and assessment necessitates going beyond superficial notions of enjoyment. Two opposing perspectives were discussed relating to influences around film choice. First, some participants stated that they chose films that were relevant to their own lives:

> I work in a youth club in the summer, and last year while I was there a boy got stabbed and got killed. To see those kids, how they reacted, it wasn't the stereotypical way, I was just like "they're so misunderstood." They act a certain way, they're loud, but when you speak to them in little groups, they are very vulnerable, and some people don't really know how it is to be young, in a deprived area, with nothing to do. I like Top Boy, gang culture was portrayed differently, and I wanted to look at that some more. It was a personal one. (Jane)

This example indicates that choice can enable students to explore a range of in-depth, powerful, and sensitive issues highly relevant to their own interests [7]. While existing research highlights that choice is an important element of filmic pedagogies [10], the discussion here extends the discussion by considering the significance of subject specialism. A film review focusing on youth combines the familiarity of films [3] with students' own current or historical personal experiences of being young. This point reflects the broader and increasing focus within HE to encourage students to become reflexive learners, reflecting upon their histories, present, and futures [23], and film reviews enable reflexive exploration of issues relevant to students' own lives in an accessible manner. Furthermore, giving students the choice of film supports the widening participation agenda in the UK and elsewhere (which has led to an increasingly diverse study body) [45].

However, "relatability" (i.e., the actual connections between students and the issues they choose) may take many forms, as reflected in the different films chosen by the participants. Furthermore, the discussions highlighted a complex relationship between relevancy and relatability and experience. In contrast to the above point where participants stated choosing films due to their familiarity with specific films, other students chose films that were relevant to youth, even though they themselves did not have specific experience/knowledge of, as one student explained:

> There are lots of different things that I didn't know about the LGBT community. I pushed myself to do something (Sex Education) that was out of my comfort zone, that I didn't know. I enjoyed the show in general, but I didn't know the issues of what goes on behind the community, because I've only had one friend from that community. Looking at the statistics, for (LGBT) youth, schools are not really helping them, and there are so few alliances, (few) people they can seek out help, it made me realise how much the curriculum needed to change . . . Because mine was outside my comfort zone, it was like,

> "no, I have to pay attention to these issues, these are serious issues." (Maheera)

This example illustrates that choice can enable students to explore issues that they themselves have not yet related to (though may be highly relevant to youth). This finding supports other research, which identifies the value of films in enabling students to look beyond their own experiences and develop broader subject knowledge [4, 14].

All participants highlighted that having the freedom to choose their own film and the issues within offered more autonomy than other forms of assignment:

> this (assignment) was more like us being free and being able to express our viewpoints, compared to like other ways of doing a review, because in my mindset, me doing a review (on Never Have I Ever) is basically my viewpoint throughout . . . It's our creative side coming out, we saw more of our skills that we have. (Marvena)

Once more, these examples highlight the importance of choice to successful filmic pedagogies, a factor also identified by Bay and Felton [11].

Several participants used the phrase "ownership" when discussing the assignment:

> Obviously it has to relate to the module . . . but when it comes to the ownership, you get more say and a lot more control in this module than I have in any of my other ones. (Lewes, Mean Girls)

> It was quite creative . . . So I thought this was, "oh yeah, it's creative, something I naturally watch," so I knew I would be more interested in that. (Maheera, Sex Education)

These two quotes provide interesting and different insights into the opportunities and challenges around autonomy and assignments. Many participants stated that they valued the creativity of the process, though many students mentioned that such autonomy, choice, and creativity were indeed a challenge:

> I think it's probably a journey that, you know, things that you have to learn, it's a process of learning how to take ownership of that knowledge and how you can make it explicit and how you can make it. How you can work with the information that's given to you, to make it your own. (Fatima, Sex Education)

Although a range of studies highlight the use of films for learning across an entire range of age groups and abilities [7, 9], the student comments here suggest that using films in a sophisticated and autonomous manner are particularly appropriate for final-year undergraduate students [11]. This reflects that, in the UK, final-year students are expected to demonstrate in-depth, critical knowledge and understanding of terminology and concepts in key aspects of their chosen field of study and to be able to develop and apply discipline-specific specialist skills [46]. Therefore, participants reported that having the ability to choose their own film is neither an easy nor straightforward option, though it offered potential rewards. "Choice" presents challenges and complexities for them to navigate, which (as the next section highlights) often required support and dialogue with teachers.

4. Developing Films: Formative Support

The second thematic category identified the importance of student–staff interactions in the process of students constructing their assignments. Three thematic subcategories were identified: specifically in-class viewings and discussions, examples of good practice, and individual tutorials with staff. These are explored in this section.

Formative activities are key to supporting students to succeed with assignments [47–49]. Participants discussed the range of formative tasks designed to help preparation for their film review assignment. First, students discussed the value of the two in-class film screenings and subsequent class discussions (typically Bend it Like Beckham and Mean Girls):

> I think it helped as a lot of people didn't know you could watch a film and analyse it in the way we were analyzing it. So in class, I thought "wow – we can look at it scene by scene, character by character, how they interact, how they act." Sometimes I've looked at films and thought "why have they done that?" but I've never thought they did it like this for a particular point. That was quite an eye opener. (Calisto, Breakfast Club)

This quote exemplifies the responses from most students – most participants reported that these in-class discussions created space for students to explore the films they had just watched and also informed their assignment preparation:

> Those are kinds of peer review, I think it's useful to get other people to pick up things that you haven't thought about, or things that you thought about may not necessarily be relevant or as relevant as (you thought) they may be, so I remember that gave me more motivation to sit down and write the thing, and get down to it. (Fatima, Sex Education)

These accounts highlight the centrality of active learning [49] to successful filmic pedagogies, mirroring the evidence of others who highlight how discussions in the classroom helped to inspire, motivate, and engage students to undertake assignments [10, 11].

However, not all participants stated that they valued in-class discussions, and not all students attended these sessions. Although absences from class are not unique to the module being discussed here [50, 51], in part these absences might be explained by students not seeing these sessions as essential or of value or relevance. As participants stated:

> I decided to miss the Mean Girls lesson when we broke it down and mapped it out. (Vicky, Kidulthood)

> everyone is different and some people would want it (the session) organised in a different way. (Fatima, Sex Education)

These examples indicate that some students may have not accessed this type of formative support for a number of reasons, including different approaches to learning, which do not suit in-class discussions [11, 29]. These examples clearly point to how students report that supporting them through a range of formative activities is preferred so that students can choose forms of engagement that reflect best their own styles and ways of learning. Having only one type of formative activity runs the risk of failing to engage with members of the group who do not enjoy that activity or find it helpful.

The second strand of formative support discussed by the participants was the distribution of in-class, and discussions around, examples of good practice of film reviews:

> The . . . thing that helped was those samples. It just gives you an idea of how to pull out certain relevant bits and apply it to theory and, and how to criticize it or, or expand on the examples that you have picked out. It's just a practical way of practicing your own review. (Fatima, Sex Education)

While this student's view reflected the views of many others, some students again did not attend these sessions (reflecting the many different pressures students face that may limit attendance) [50] and therefore missed out on these opportunities to develop their ideas.

The third type of formative support was via individual tutorials. Participants highlighted the value of one-to-one or small group

tutorials with staff, available throughout the term, to discuss assignment preparation. One participant commented:

> I think your one-to-one tutorial was an eye opener for me. How I was structuring the essay was all one sided… I made it seem like socialisation was controlling these young people (in Mean Girls) and that they were just robots following in a line, and you were like "is it really like that?" You didn't tell me, you asked "is it really like that? Think back (to what we've covered in the module about young people's agency)." So I do think that the… tutorials really, really did help and it is a vital piece of the module. (Lewes)

Formative assignments in the form of verbal discussions have been shown to be extremely valuable in guiding students [47], and the students' views here suggest the film review is no exception. Indeed, such reassurance and support are perhaps even more important for helping building confidence for more innovative assignments such as film reviews [44]. There are, however, significant resource implications for offering such time-consuming individual tutorials, which raises complex questions about resourcing of teaching within a particularly constrained funding climate (at least within the UK and elsewhere) [43].

While all those who took part in the research spoke very highly about the value of such tutorials, it must also be noted that in the academic years in which the research was undertaken, up to one-third of each cohort of students did not book in for a tutorial. There may be many reasons why students do not engage in learning opportunities [43, 50] and without talking directly to those students speculation can only be tentative – though again it may well be that this type of formative support does not meet students' learning needs.

Common throughout these discussions is that the autonomy, independence, and freedom associated with a film review needs to be complemented with essential, ongoing support. Formative support in a range of informal and formal types [48], involving staff feedback and peer discussions, can help students who are engaged in the process to feel more confident, focused, and able to meet the required academic standard [47].

5. Reviewing Films: Student Perceptions of the Impact of the Assignment

The third thematic category related to student perceptions around the impact of undertaking the assignment. The subthemes identified here relate to increased enthusiasm and motivation for studying; deeper, critical thinking; and an increased professional knowledge base. Each of these is now explored.

The overwhelming majority of the participants stated that they enjoyed undertaking the film review, identifying a number of benefits. Students reported high levels of motivation to conduct the film review:

> I was actually getting excited in my film review. Finding my points (about The Hate U Give), then thinking "how can this be backed by theory?" I actually enjoyed it more than already having the theory, if that makes sense. (Pandora, The Hate U Give)

Experiences of contemporary HE are characterized by a wide range of diverse assignment types and purposes, some more motivating to students than others [19, 29, 45], and this quote suggests film reviews can generate interest and motivation for academic studying. As mentioned earlier, the "relatability" of films led to increased motivation for this type of assignment:

> I think it's a great way to engage with people, as people watch films all the time. And I think it's something that we can relate to, we can take it apart, and link to an academic piece of work, I think everyone can relate to that, the relatability test. That's quite cool and it gets you thinking. (Fatima, Sex Education)

Some participants stated that this enthusiasm and motivation encouraged students to further their knowledge and understanding of issues relevant to youth:

> It gives you more of an understanding as to why young people are the way they are, and why that might be hard for them to break out of certain cycles or transitions for the better. (Belinda, Blue Story)

These quotes suggest the film review encouraged and motivated students to engage in "deeper" learning, a form of higher-order thinking associated with, but not always easily realized within, HE [12, 43].

Furthermore, several students said gaining more knowledge and understanding about youth had made them think more critically, challenging their ideas and perceptions:

> It did make me see other people's opinions about (youth), and be like "you know what, I might see it this way, but this is also how it could be seen too." (Darla, Blue Story)

This participant highlights that films enabled them to challenge and question their own values, preconceptions, and ideas, reflecting key discourses of personal development and growth that are often identified as one purpose of education in the UK and elsewhere [19, 46].

"Generations" is a key analytical concept in Youth Studies [20, 24], and participants identified how the film review had made them more aware of and reflect upon a range of differences between themselves and other generations:

> Well, you don't exactly compare yourself and what you would do but you kind of perhaps compare my generation to the younger generations, how they act, how they behave, how their attitudes are… (Fatima, Sex Education)

While this student in her early 20s explained how the assignment made her compare her own experiences with those of "the younger generations," a more mature student discussed how it made her reflect on their generational understanding:

> I realized how biased I am. When you see school kids, I was one of those school kids being on the bus, being loud, now I go "ohhhhhh no," I turn my back, they're loud. I think doing the module made me think I need to step back. When you're talking about older people complaining that young people are lazy, I was thinking "am I that older person?"… there are things that have come up in the review that have made me think. If I see groups of children I may fall into that stereotype of saying that they are a gang, and I didn't realise that's what I was (doing). (Jane, Top Boy)

However, these points focusing on reflective, deeper levels of learning were not mentioned by all participants, and it must be noted that perhaps predictably, some students did not gain high marks for this assignment, suggesting that the film review did not enable all students to engage in this "deeper" learning or encourage more critical thinking.

Some students described how the film review was a more "tangible form" of assignment compared to others:

> The film review puts it in tangible form. So it's not just reading and looking at studies, you can actually relate whatever theme you're looking at, to the film (Young Royals), to the tangible form, and seeing it in the film. (Neo, Young Royals).

Thus, in addition to developing subject-specific knowledge, film reviews also offer interesting ways for students to apply these knowledges [46] to a range of situations. In developing more insightful and critical understandings of youth, several students

said that the film review was an excellent preparation for professional life after graduation:

> We wanna be teachers. Understanding these things, transitions, identity, the things that they are going through (in Top Boy), we can be really good advocates for them, because we know there are a lot of teachers who are there because they are good at science or good at maths. They didn't necessarily understand the things I was going through at school, and it would have been good to have a teacher identify that she is maybe going through this, let me have this conversation. (Jane)

Thus, these students explained how they valued how the film review enabled them to further develop their professional knowledge base and skills. This suggests films are a potentially valuable way to help support students for professions and professional life [11, 20, 36]. These comments reflect the very powerful, dominant narrative within the UK and elsewhere regarding HE's role in preparing graduates for labor market participation [43]. However, not all participants identified this impact, suggesting that some students did not make these links or could not articulate them.

Similarly, many participants explained how the process had changed how they watch films:

> Now when I watch films, I keep analysing them, dissecting them. I watch a lot of kids' programmes with my sister and I think "why haven't they got any ethnic minorities in this? What are they teaching my sister?" I never used to notice that before. I used to glaze over it, now I'm interested in the characters . . . It was an eye opener, as I'd never seen it before. I'd seen it lots of times before but never noticed it. But that's what I think I have got from this assignment. (Calisto, Breakfast Club)

Although not specialist media studies students, these student accounts suggest how they are no longer just "spectators" of films [16] but engage with films on a different analytical level. This shows how film analysis has the potential to contribute to key graduate competencies, specifically enhancing critical media literacy skills [19]. Furthermore, as the above participant quote hints at, one further subtle consequence is that increased media literacy can lead to films offering less overall pleasure, lessening their sense of fun and escapism from the everyday world, which for many students is what initially makes films so appealing [1].

6. Conclusion

Across a range of international and cross cultural contexts, contemporary HE is characterized by a wide range of diverse pedagogical approaches and assignment types [29, 45]. This article offers insight into how Donnelly's [7] "filmic pedagogies" are a valid and valued addition to this range. While most literature refers to filmic pedagogies specifically in relation to teaching and learning in the classroom (Bay and Felton [12], Mak and Hutton [10], Membrives et al. [8], Walker [9]), this article contributes to existing debates through a much-needed discussion of assignments engaging with films. Although the article focuses specifically on how film reviews explore issues around youth, the findings offer a number of broader transferrable insights, which suggest the relevance and versatility of such assignments for a wide range of disciplines in HE, beyond specialist media studies degree programs.

The discussion illustrates students' perceptions of the different and diverse strengths of using films within HE, and the article communicates students' mostly enthusiastic experiences of conducting film reviews to explore youth. Compared to some other forms of teaching, learning, and assessment, the student views presented here suggest films are highly relatable for students, both in relation to the format (since films are so familiar to students) and also the content (as films explore ordinary and not-so-ordinary lives and issues). Moreover, the article shows how this can help to inspire, enthuse, and motivate most (but not all) HE students to engage in film analysis to learn and explore subject-specialist knowledge, both in class and as a form of assignment. Again, while this article explores this specifically in relation to youth, these findings hint that film reviews may, irrespective of the discipline or content, be highly versatile and inspire and motivate students to engage across a range of subjects, across a range of countries and educational contexts [7, 10, 11, 13].

The student viewpoints presented here suggest that irrespective of degree program, filmic pedagogies might inspire and motivate deeper learning than other types of learning experiences. In addition, film reviews can also help prepare graduates for labor market participation and professional life, contributing to the rapidly developing focus on graduate competencies [43]. In particular, film reviews can encourage further professional knowledge development, reflexive and critical thinking, and increased media literacy skills so that graduates can demonstrate being critical consumers of media rather than mere "spectators" [16, 30].

However, the article also highlights the complexities around developing effective filmic pedagogies. Indeed, the discussions with the participants suggest that the more nuanced question is not whether film reviews are useful assignments but rather how they can be made accessible, interesting, and achievable for students. The participants' accounts also suggest that some students may not enjoy film reviews or find them compelling. Therefore, effective filmic pedagogies are neither easy nor straightforward. The accounts here tease out the challenges both for staff (in terms of motivating students, offering support, guidance, and the associated resource implications) and for students (film choice, motivation, identifying impacts on their learning), which must not be underestimated.

One of these challenges around developing effective filmic pedagogies highlights the essential and complimentary processes of autonomy and support. While students value the autonomy, independence, and creative process associated with undertaking a film review of the student's own choosing, this is indeed a challenge, even for final-year undergraduate students. Autonomy needs to be complemented and scaffolded with essential, ongoing formative student support to enable students to feel confident, focused, and able to succeed [12, 47]. Furthermore, the article also reminds us (either specifically in relation to filmic pedagogies or any other teaching, learning, and assessment activity) that the needs of students and their approaches to learning may be very diverse.

Despite its contributions, the research presented here has its limitations. The research was a small-scale qualitative project, a self-selecting sample, and based only on one institution within one country. Further research is needed to explore whether these findings are similar across other HE institutions and across different countries. Second, since the research was carried out over a relatively long period of time (and throughout the disruptive COVID-19 pandemic), the discussion presented here may well be shaped by a range of events that may have been unique to each particular year cohort. Third, despite the popular conception, the notion that young people are "digital natives" is indeed a stereotype [27]. Since the student population is increasingly diverse, some students (of all ages) may not find films so "relatable" and, as some limited examples here suggest, some students may struggle with this assignment. Although it is

perhaps striking that such reluctance was mostly absent in the focus group interview discussions, this type of assignment must be designed to help support those who do not easily relate to films. Fourth, the data presented here is based on student reporting and self-reflection – it is impossible to know whether this assignment objectively impacted positively upon student achievement and whether students performed better in film reviews than in an alternative form of assessment. Despite these limitations, the mostly positive voices of these students shed light both into some of the complexities and some of the strategies that can help support "filmic pedagogies" to have potential beyond specialist media studies programs to contribute to teaching, learning, and assessment across a range of disciplines and subject specialisms.

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Ethical Statement

The research project was informed by British Educational Research Association guidance and research ethics approval was given by Middlesex University Education Research Ethics Committee, No 11221. All participants of the study provided their written consent before participating in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

For information about the data, please contact the researcher.

Author Contribution Statement

John Barker: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision.

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