

The Loneliness of the Cinematic Academic: Reflections on Reconnecting and Community

Veronica Johnson

Even before Covid, the academic life had its moments of loneliness. Hours spent researching, writing, and preparing classes alone, watching films alone, going to archives alone can be wonderful; but it can also be isolating and lonely work. Of course, this loneliness was interspersed with time spent with colleagues; working together in the same department, attending meetings in person, co-teaching, meeting up at conferences, collaborating on a project, going for coffee or lunch. So, before Covid, there was some sort of a balance between the work one did alone and the work one did with colleagues, and there was a sense that you could turn to someone in person if there was a problem. Since Covid the connectedness of the academic life has taken a blow. We connect more frequently to each other electronically, through email, online meetings and various social medias. We do more work alone and more work from home, there is less meeting up in person for meetings or coffees. Most of the time, most of us have adjusted to this new way of being an academic, we still enjoy the work, and we still grumble about it as we did before Covid.

However, there is one important way in which the loneliness of the cinematic academic has had a very serious impact on our working lives and that is in relation to the gap between established scholars and early career researchers and how we communicate with each other. This gap has widened for many reasons, mostly because we don't see each other in person to the same degree. We feel that we are busier because we conduct more of our time online, in a global shrinking of academic jobs we worry for our career future and in a time of technological produced writing we are concerned about authenticating our work and that of our students. In this climate, there are good channels for sharing information, we post about job and funding opportunities, new books and CFPs, but the connections to each other that go beyond this have weakened.

All of this came home to me at the final session at the Irish Screen Studies conference in Cork in May of this year. Billed as a Roundtable on Professional Horizons it was facilitated by Temmuz Gürbüz and Barry Monahan and attended by about fifteen academics at various career stages. It quickly became apparent that this was to be no ordinary discussion, with the facilitators managing to create a space where most people felt very comfortable in discussing their own difficulties with the academic system as it now stands. This was not a "grumble and complain and take no action" roundtable. Rather people spoke of their own struggles in a genuine way, their honesty encouraged others to speak, until it became clear that most people in the room had experienced or were experiencing the same issues. This was the "ah-ha" moment, where we all realised that we were not alone in our difficulties, that others had similar experiences and that we could all learn from and help each other. Suddenly, the loneliness of the cinematic academic worker was breached and new

connections and potential new networks were formed. What was and is unique about this grouping is that it is a coming together of established scholars and early career researchers facing the systemic problems in academia together.

In the moments when I haven't been employed as an academic, I have had interesting experiences when I meet old colleagues, or people I did my PhD with, who I haven't seen in a while. When I tell them I'm at the end of a contract, they make what I call "the face". This is an expression unique to these circumstances; it is a mixture of sympathy and guilt. They are sorry that I'm not working in a job that I want to be working in, and they feel guilty that they are working in a job in academia while I am not. It usually makes for an awkward start to a conversation, with both of us saying how difficult it is to get an academic job in the current circumstances and then drifting off to other topics because this one seems to make us both feel uncomfortable, as if somehow we are both responsible in some way for the lack of academic jobs.

And this uncomfortableness stems in part from that loneliness of the cinematic academic worker, we don't talk to each other face to face as much as we did before, and as a result we think that our situations, our problems, and our experiences are unique. So that when we do talk to each other, we feel uncomfortable if one of us is working and the other is not, or if one of us got promoted, or if one of us is struggling with a difficult class, or if one of us has just got a huge grant. We know how to respond to these events online, but we are losing the ability to respond to them in person, our loneliness is hampering our ability to connect as colleagues. The thing that we all need to acknowledge is that academia is constantly and rapidly changing and that we need each other to get through these changes together. The gaps between new and established scholars need to be breached and the only way to do that is through communication, bad practices, and bad behaviour needs to be shared as does good practices and good behaviour. I hope that the spirit of that Roundtable in Cork in May 2025 will spread and that we will continue to talk to each other face to face.

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Veronica Johnson is former *IRCHSS* scholar, and is currently a Council member of the *International Association for Media and History* and co-editor and book editor of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. Her work focuses on early and silent cinema. Based in Galway, frequently in Dublin and occasionally in London, she welcomes discussion in person about this or other cinema-related topics.

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