

Can Precarity be Cinematic?

Response to “The Loneliness of the Cinematic Academic: Reflections on Reconnecting and Community”, by Veronica Johnson

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In her heartfelt contribution to this inaugural issue of the *Irish Screen Studies* Journal, Veronica Johnson writes of the interesting concept “cinematic academic”: a scholarly figure who experiences increased loneliness within cinema studies. I feel privileged to be given the opportunity to respond to Johnson’s piece, as this theme relates to formative ideas behind the *Irish Screen Studies* “Network”. This Network is first and foremost a space where we have been discussing possible strategies for building academic solidarity. It is also a space where the *ISS* committee and the participants of the annual conference convene around non-seminar issues. The need for some form of Network was also motivated by a desire to connect postgraduate researchers whose contributions and development are central to the foundations of this organisation. This led to “Professional Horizons” (PH): the final session of last year’s *ISS* Conference at UCC (May 2025). While early on in her piece, Johnson sees at the heart of academic loneliness “the gap between established scholars and early career researchers and how we communicate with each other” (2026, 100), later she reminisces on the session with hope, as she sees the gathering as a way of “facing the systemic problems” together (101).

This response emerges from my conflict between the urge to produce a speedy write-up that reflects the urgency of worsening conditions for the “cinematic academic” in Ireland, and on the other hand, the sense that the problem of academic precarity requires slower strategic planning. I felt a similar tension after the PH session, walking in Cork with Johnson: both of us energised, yet pensive. During the PH discussion, a central theme was how academic loneliness is systemically produced in Irish institutions. Emergencies can also be experienced as blockages in relation to writing: the perpetual need for further research, further depth, to understand the subject at hand, delays achieving an understanding that, counterintuitively, often only emerges through the writing activity itself. I am beginning to see through my conflict here, that there is a strong correlation between individual blockage and the ways in which an academic environment blocks one’s ability to settle within it.

This urgent map is yet to exist, and let’s acknowledge that this mapping is a tricky task for any precarious life in the university and actually calls for a dedicated collective effort. As Johnson notes, “the face” of the secure academic who hears about the conditions of precarious other, is “an expression unique to these circumstances [...] a mixture of sympathy and guilt” (101).¹ This expression is also evocative of how Judith Butler writes of media frames in *Frames of War*. There, ethics of responsibility come to the surface of recognition: “it is the face of the other that demands

from us an ethical response.” (2009, 77) This is a potentially egalitarian moment, as we reciprocally recognise our own security within a specific environment in a fundamental way through that of another’s precarity. This dependency is also what makes academic loneliness “cinematic” (beyond being the shared research field): there are aesthetic and ironic potentials in our reciprocal experience of discomfort in the face of the other. Reflecting this, therefore, albeit indirectly, also concerns how such academic loneliness and injury are concealed by the faceless (ghostliness) of administration, particularly through structural expectations shaped by industry-facing higher education models such as the Human Capital Initiative.²

One of the ideas discussed during the Professional Horizons conversation was how to expose systemic inequalities to wider audiences. Shall we share with our students how we are working without a contract? Perhaps the respect Irish society has for university education can be strategically addressed through infiltrating the mainstream channels? These questions are inevitably unanswered so far without enough time and research (though we all have some ideas). The PH session made it clear how strategies of exposure also stutter, get delayed, as one’s academic writing can. Because exposure makes one vulnerable to being perceived as a victim, even while attempting to figure out productive ways to resist that very victimisation.

In her conclusion, Johnson mentions certain “bad behaviours” as something we need to talk about in our Network. How bad behaviours – misconduct and abuse – are enabled by the institutions is a central concern. Ethical valorisation is also material valorisation, and the labourer should be respectfully provided with the security and safety necessary to sustain that labour. We can perhaps extend Johnson’s useful concept of the “cinematic academic” to one who understands the ethical charge of media frames. One might imagine a docufiction, a documentary of sorts, or even better, a mockumentary that is a public intervention, rendering visible, making use of the tragicomicity of the precarious academic who struggles to “stay in the game” and (therefore) call out systemic abuse. However, as long as the cinematic sensibilities among us are protected, such as the knowledge of ironic reclamation of mainstream aesthetics, such as the image of the poor academic, marking dissertations while they earn 15€ per dissertation (which is true in the case TU Dublin), the creative methods we can employ might not have to mean heavy risk of self-jeopardization. If we agree that intellectual labour can combine with expressive forms, perhaps it might be possible to articulate precarity as a shared phenomenon.

NOTES

1. In some cultures, recognising the other through their face can signal immediate danger, hence destruction, where survival corresponds to a violent logic of “kill the other before it kills you”. This suggests that “the face” is a unique moment (as Johnson notes) where our interrelationality

becomes recognisable; be it in the form of pre-emptive violence, or pre-emptive alliance. Perhaps in the case of the “cinematic academic”, the concept of face can be useful to give our encounters a cinematic quality, where our senses of security and precarity are recognized as entangled.

2. This leads me to the prospect of a “neoliberal academia without Humanities” where even the merit-based value assigned to academic work evaporates in the face of “capital needs”. Please see the key objectives of HCI here, centralising “high productivity growth sectors”: <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/what-is-human-capital-initiative-hci/>

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