

**TEACHING AMERICAN STUDIES****TEACHING HOLLYWOOD II****INTRODUCTION**

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Joy McEntee's article continues the discussion of teaching Hollywood film begun in the July 2007 issue, by Michelle Langford's article, "The Hollywood System." Rather than describing another syllabus, McEntee offers a theoretical reflection on one of the particular challenges of teaching Hollywood film: that, as Langford put it,

*Students, who habitually consume Hollywood film as entertainment, are sometimes resistant to the defamiliarisation that occurs when challenged to approach such films analytically. Although particularly pronounced in the case of Hollywood film, this experience is common to teaching in all areas of American Studies.*

This article offers opportunity for all teachers to reflect on how they respond when confronted with students struggling against adopting a critical perspective on familiar cultural forms. McEntee draws on a developing strain in educational theory that has potential to help account for what students are doing when they negotiate potentially transformative moments in their learning. This is the threshold concept developed by Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land. The particular focus of this scholarship is how a student confronting such moments is forced to reconstitute his or her sense of self, triggering a sense of loss. Coming to terms with transformative knowledge is thus an affective experience. Employing this framework, McEntee reflects on how she helps students negotiate this emotion.

Starting from recognition of the discomfort caused by troublesome knowledge, she focuses first on generating teachable moments from when students resist, rather than reacting defensively. In addition, McEntee presents academic ways of knowing as extension of students' previous engagement with film as entertainment, an emphasis on continuity rather than rupture between their roles as fans and critics. Her strategies for overcoming student resistance involve luring them toward threshold concepts by inviting them to play. These classroom experiences generate a critique of the threshold concept, for its insistence that the transformation wrought by exposure to analytic frameworks cannot be rewound. In the

realm of film, McEntee argues, students never fully cross the threshold but instead oscillate between the ‘common-sense’ and the academic.

**INDUCING DOUBLE VISION, OR DOES THE ‘THRESHOLD  
CONCEPT’ ACCOUNT FOR HOW STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT  
THE HOLLYWOOD FILM?**

JOY MCENTEE

*I recognized my brother. It was the same Wieland whom I had ever  
seen. Yet his features were pervaded by a new expression.<sup>1</sup>*

Most of the students who enrol in my courses, ‘Hollywood or Bust!’ and ‘American Gothic’, come in with more than a little knowledge of both Hollywood film and America. In some ways, this prior knowledge is helpful. In others, it presents problems. In this article, I examine how well Meyer and Land’s idea of the ‘threshold concept’ accounts for what students go through in courses like mine — courses that deal with the familiar stuff of American popular culture in ways that require them to look again, and differently, at something they thought they already knew.<sup>2</sup> Some students welcome the new way of looking, but many find it almost as unsettling as the change Clara discovers in her brother Wieland as he basks in the afterglow of murdering his family. It is that discomfort in discovering the unfamiliar in the familiar, and what it means for teaching Hollywood film, that I want to explore here.

This article theorises an approach to teaching, and particular moments in my teaching experience. A condensed outline of my teaching situation will contextualise the theoretical discussion. I work in the English Discipline at the University of Adelaide, convening two 12-week upper-level undergraduate courses: ‘Hollywood or Bust!’ and ‘American Gothic.’ Because I work in English, the emphasis is on students learning about the analysis of narrative structure, dramatic technique and aesthetics. They are encouraged to consider how the politics and economics of production and reception have interacted with technology to drive aesthetic development, and to engage with theoretical concepts and debates that have shaped Film, Literary and Cultural Studies discourses.

In her article ‘The Hollywood System,’ Michelle Langford identifies some of the ‘sticky moments’ of teaching Hollywood film. Students enrol in film courses because they love going to the movies as a recreational, rather than an intellectual, pursuit. They are *very* familiar with Hollywood film as entertainment, and are more than ‘sometimes’ resistant to the turn they must take in order to start watching films analytically.<sup>3</sup> The apparent familiarity of

Hollywood film complicates matters, as students may not recognise that the ways of understanding film we require them to develop are unfamiliar, or 'foreign.'<sup>4</sup> This applies equally to those students who enrol believing studying film will be 'a bludge subject,' and to those students who are 'movie buffs.' Often, students who are essentially very knowledgeable fans produce essays that are insufficiently analytic, and wonder why, given their depth of knowledge and the amount of effort expended, they aren't getting the grades they deserve.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Michelle Langford's students, my students have rarely completed an introductory film course. This means I cannot generalise about their state of preparedness. I never know quite what I'm going to get, and my best guide is those moments when students' unauthorised cries and whispers 'let me in on' the secret life of their learning. An emblematic classroom moment is this. In the course of a lecture, I started to discuss the film's closure. A howl of outrage went up from the body of the lecture theatre: 'You gave away the ending!' Clearly, there was more than one student in the audience who hadn't quite apprehended that there was a difference between watching a movie for the thrill of seeing what happens, and analysing a movie to see how it is constructed, never mind interrogating the industrial, political and ideological context in which it came into being, was marketed and/or received. This cry in the dark represented a moment when 'every day' understandings of 'what movie critics do' (i.e. write reviews to guide movie consumers in their ticket-buying decisions) crossed swords with academic and disciplinary understandings of critical activity. The cry was also symptomatic of a real anxiety that learning the ways of knowing I was presenting was threatening. It marked the birth of a fear that cultivating the kind of analytic detachment required to succeed in the course might entail a loss of pleasure in going to the movies.

Many teachers negotiate this kind of resistance successfully as part of their daily business, and I do not suggest that the ways I handle it are particularly novel. However, the process by which film teachers invite students to take the analytic 'turn' warrants theorisation because it exemplifies a problem faced in many Humanities disciplines. We invite students to look again, and differently, at cultural phenomena they think they already know from everyday life. What we do is fraught with contradictions: we both rely on students' prior knowledge, their cultural capital, their 'everyday' experience, and seek to displace or estrange elements of it. Teaching Hollywood film has particular intensities, because students are often very attached to their everyday understandings, and reluctant to let them go. The struggle is fierce because of the strange and tenuous way the subject gets taught: against the overwhelming and ever-present competition of the commercial and ideological discourses that frame students' initial (and probably enduring)

engagements with Hollywood film. We might teach ways of thinking and talking about film, but next to the visceral experience of cinematic spectatorship, how seductive can such academic engagements really be? What is the teacher to do when the student resists academic ways of knowing because he or she fears losing his or her everyday pleasures?<sup>6</sup>

There is a developing strain in educational theory that might help account for what my students are doing when they negotiate potentially transformative moments in their learning. This is the idea of the ‘threshold concept,’ as developed by Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land in *Overcoming Barriers to Student Learning: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge*. The ‘threshold concept’ has considerable resonance for those of us who teach in discipline areas which interrogate naturalised or ‘common sense’ ways of seeing the world. However, the work of figuring out whether this theoretical framework ‘fits’ my disciplinary area — in which film studies and literary studies intersect — has barely begun. In this article, then, I want to start testing the applicability of the idea of the ‘threshold concept’ to teaching my particular corner of ‘American Studies.’

Enumerating the characteristics of the threshold concept, Meyer and Land say that it is likely to be:

*Transformative, in that . . . its potential effect . . . is to occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject . . . In certain powerful instances, such as the comprehension of specific politico-philosophical insights . . . the shift in perspective may lead to a transformation of personal identity, a reconstruction of subjectivity. In such instances transformed perspective is likely to involve an affective component — a shift in values, feeling or attitude. . . .*<sup>7</sup>

My experience is that students encounter transformative ‘politico-philosophical insights’ when they learn that films they have hitherto regarded as ‘mere’ entertainments may be seen to operate politically, and that they, as spectators, may not be ‘innocent’ bystanders. And to their dismay, students may find there’s no going back. Meyer and Land say that the effect of the threshold concept, once grasped, is ‘[p]robably *irreversible*, in that the change of perspective occasioned by acquisition of a threshold concept is unlikely to be forgotten, or will be unlearned only by considerable effort . . . .’<sup>8</sup> The point I would most like to emphasise is this: that the passage to new understanding ‘is not a comfortable transition . . . Though they have learned, and grown, [students’] transformed state initially feels like loss . . . .’<sup>9</sup> The threshold concept causes the student to reconstitute his or her

sense of self, and triggers a sensation of loss,. From these two effects emerges what Ellsworth calls the students' 'passion for ignore-ance' [sic]<sup>10</sup> The 'passion for ignore-ance' denotes a more-than-casual desire to disregard new ways of knowing. It arises not because students are lazy or deficient, but because taking on those new ways of knowing would involve them in challenging reorganisations of who they understand themselves to be.<sup>11</sup>

In 'Hollywood or Bust!', students are, indeed, losing something. Certainly, they lose their innocence with regard to enjoying Hollywood movies, and possibly with regard to institutions held even dearer, and more thoroughly 'naturalised.' They enter a classroom in which we confront how, as mutually imbricated institutions Hollywood film and the American discourse of nation, contribute to the construction of 'normativity' both in US and abroad. They learn about the movies' 'disciplining and regulation of desire,' through 'prohibition and permission,' and through the definition of 'self' with reference to the 'other.'<sup>12</sup> For students, this means that studying Hollywood film often becomes much more intellectually and emotionally challenging than it looks on enrolment day. For me, it means I often have cause to think hard about when and why students exhibit symptoms of denial, ignore-ance or resistance, and how I can best help them past the sticky moments that arise.

The first step is to openly and compassionately acknowledge the discomfort such learning entails. Threshold concepts produce what Perkins has called 'troublesome knowledge.' Students may approach new discipline-appropriate ways of knowing about Hollywood film with scepticism or resistance because they appear 'counter-intuitive,' which in this instance means counter to the ways in which the conventions of realist film 'teach' spectators to consume them. Students may also find discipline-appropriate ways of knowing about film both 'alien' and alienating, in that they threaten a loss of 'innocent' enjoyment. Meyer and Land suggest that the threshold concept may 'compensate' students by being 'integrative,' helping them develop coherent understandings of the disciplines they are entering.<sup>13</sup> For my students, however, the threshold concept operates more like the lid of Pandora's Box — opening to reveal a field that is internally problematised and contested by different methodologies and theoretical paradigms. Worse, breaching the threshold concept may reveal that the student's own 'naturalised' way of seeing the subject or the world is not to be regarded as 'innocent,' politically neutral, or uncontested. The student is likely to discover that going along with Hollywood movies, watching them in their own terms, has imbricated him or her in a whole array of 'normative' discourses, like heterosexuality, or individualism, and that those discourses are problematic. Still more horrifying for some of my students, whose 'Australian' identity is constructed by the oppositional phrase 'not

American,' they may discover uncertainties about how, when and to what extent the movies may have 'colonised' their psyches. A student may shift abruptly from being a 'voyeuristic' learner, who can calmly regard the American cinematic Other 'without looking at himself/herself,' to being a 'defended learner,' hostile and resistant when he or she discovers that really, 'troublesome knowledge' does touch on '“things close to [the] heart.”'<sup>14</sup>

Coming to terms with the threshold concept is never 'merely' conceptual or abstract: it is also profoundly affective, and students' responses to it are likely to be emotional. Meyer and Land evoke Hodgkin's description of the student as working 'somewhere in the gap that exists between history, scholarship and the feeling of being on the edge of tears.'<sup>15</sup> The ideas of the 'threshold concept,' 'troublesome knowledge' and the 'passion for ignorance' constitute a theoretical framework that helps me account for the affective component of my students' learning. It also helps me describe how I deal with the 'noise' of students' prior knowledge of, and investment in, Hollywood film. This approach has several components, including a strategy of 'pouncing' on moments when students 'resist' to generate 'teachable moments,' and presenting academic ways of knowing about film as an extension of students' previous engagement with film as entertainment.

I regard student 'resistance' as a 'symptom' of whatever is going on in those parts of the student learning process that are invisible to me, a symptom that gives me opportunities to deal explicitly and constructively with the learning issue at hand. Respecting the passion for ignorance means anticipating sites of resistance and developing means of dealing constructively with it. It means not being offended by student resistance, or dismissive of it. We should remember that the threshold concept can make students feel 'confused, stuck, stupid, guilty, blinkered, embarrassed, or silenced.'<sup>16</sup> It is critical, then, not to respond in a way that makes students *look* stupid or feel condemned and alienated, too. For example, the student who objected to my giving away the movie's ending gave me an opportunity to articulate the difference between what students might think of as film criticism from their everyday experience and film criticism as it is practised academically. He also gave me an opportunity to flag the differences between consuming movies as entertainment, and seeing them as objects for analysis. The student's objection helped me express the goals of the course explicitly, in terms that met the students where they were, rather than where I'd inaccurately imagined them to be.

Another example of student resistance that helped me meet the students where they were comes from the first time I ran 'Hollywood or Bust!' In a week 2 lecture, I asked the students what they thought about *Birth of a Nation*. A cry of camp anguish arose from the audience: 'In God's Name!

Why?’ Now this is the kind of response that could set any teacher of American film back on his or her heels. The importance of D.W. Griffith, as both an industrial and aesthetic founder of what later became Hollywood, is self-evident to those of us who are steeped in academic ways of thinking about American film. But for this student at least, and for many others, *Birth of a Nation* had failed to justify its own existence, let alone its presence on the syllabus. My spur-of-the-moment answer was ‘Because it’s good for you — like bran.’ This didn’t necessarily console the students, but it did make them laugh. More importantly, acknowledging that students might find this film unpalatable, and not condemning them for being discomforted by it, opened the door to a discussion of how the film produced resistance. Most of my students ‘resisted’ *Birth of a Nation* not because of its race politics, but because it failed to entertain. That the students *didn’t* react first to the film’s race politics indicates how far Australian students can be from some of the abiding concerns of contemporary American Studies when they begin. Their ‘innocence’ with regard to the representation of race and the institution of slavery was a subject to be worked towards, but that approach could only be made once the initial barrier had been negotiated.

The first ‘teachable moment,’ then, presented itself in the discussion of *how* and *why* this film failed to entertain, as well as *whether that mattered*. I did point out that part of ‘professionalising’ as a critic is learning to engage with material you don’t necessarily like, but I went through a process of unpacking exactly what it was students found most confronting about the film, and worked from there. The first difficulties students identified were problems in concentration: they found the film unwatchable because of its length, its acting style, and its editing rhythms. We started with a discussion of the history of editing, which allowed students to learn about their own processes of paying attention, and how those processes had been formed by watching contemporary films. We went on to contextualise the melodramatic acting style of the early Silents (which students tend to dismiss as merely ‘bad’) in terms of nineteenth century theatrical antecedents, which led to a discussion of racialised tropes, and a lively debate about ‘blackface.’ This enabled students to begin to get a grip in the kinds of interrogations of representation that would be important for the rest of the course. The discussion of the melodramatic basis of the early Silents also enabled me to initiate a discussion of the Manichean terms in which the film represents both race and the Civil War. The students were then in a position to discuss *Birth of a Nation’s* political dimensions. Topics covered included the film’s claim to represent the moment at which the nation constituted itself, its valorisation of lynching and the Ku Klux Klan, and its critical role in prompting the legislation that excluded cinema from the protections of the First Amendment, which had enduring ramifications in terms of Hollywood’s nervous habit of self-censorship. The students started out

worrying about failing to be entertained by *Birth of the Nation*. By the end of the process, they still didn't like it, but they were much more sophisticated in their reflections on why this was so, and why it was important to come to terms with it. Attending to the detail of my students' complaints, resistances and coping strategies and responding constructively helped me develop the scaffolding that supported them in moving from their 'everyday' expectations of film to the intricate, historicised, politicised and theorised engagement that would help them take the 'turn' toward doing 'film analysis' and 'American Studies.'

Another component of my approach is that I valorise students' pre-existing 'every day' knowledge, while encouraging them to extend, refine or interrogate their understanding. In lectures, I present the 'turn' to analysis by telling students that I 'teach' a discipline-specific vocabulary that describes effects they're probably already observing, even if only subliminally, as consumers of film-as-entertainment. In tutorials, my role is to help students 'surface' the acts of interpretation they are already performing. When we work through a scene applying the new vocabulary; breathy exclamations like – 'Oh Yeah! I noticed that!' – float up from the classroom. In this way, the tools of analysis are presented as giving students access to an 'Aha!' experience. Constructing the student as one who 'already knows a lot' goes a long way to interesting him or her in 'finding out more.' I emphasise the amount of work students are already doing as consumers of film to make any sense of it at all. For example, teaching students about the cognitive trick that underlies making sense of montage is invaluable for revealing to students how active they are as film spectators, even when they don't know they're working. Pointing out how much inter-textual knowledge goes into the 'work' of finding *The Simpsons* funny encourages almost any student to think about him- or her-self as someone who can take up the challenge of finding out how inter-textual allusion works in *Psycho*. Indeed, the Simpson family's rendition of 'The Raven' has introduced more students to Poe, and persuaded more students to read the raven shadow in *Psycho*'s parlour scene as significant, than any scholarly exegesis I know.<sup>17</sup> Again, this is a matter of meeting students where they *really* are.

Another way I mitigate student resistance to making the analytic 'turn' is to reassure them that embracing analytic practice does *not* automatically entail a loss of enjoyment of the movies. Rather, it entails a modification of the ways one enjoys movies. My own transparent enthusiasm for the subject demonstrates to students that I'm not enjoying movies any *less* for learning more about them. I aim to teach film analysis not as an abandonment of the game of watching movies, but as an interesting elaboration of the rules. This is the kind of teaching that operates by 'luring students into learning in ways deeper than those to which they might be disposed.'<sup>18</sup>

The approach emphasises continuity rather than rupture or reversal. Enjoying film as analytic object becomes an extension of enjoying film as entertainment. The 'irreversibility' of the threshold concept almost inevitably leads to a pang that feels like loss, at first, but I am unconvinced that many of my students cross the 'threshold' into the domain of the film analyst once, permanently and forever. I know I didn't. Fannish enjoyment of movies and analytic engagement continue in parallel, and often become mutually assisting. In this respect, Meyer and Land's way of conceiving 'liminality' may not quite fit the case of the student of Hollywood film. They say: 'the transformation can be protracted, over periods of time, and involve oscillation between states, often with *temporary regression* to earlier status . . . [Despite such temporary regression] there would seem to be no rewinding of the transformative process.' (my emphasis)<sup>19</sup> What I query is the idea that reverting to 'common sense' approaches is either a regression, or temporary. I suggest that 'oscillation' itself may be the end point of the transformative process. Students may 'move on from' their everyday understandings of Hollywood film, but they do not leave them behind. 'Common sense' approaches to film are too vigorously maintained by the commercial and ideological pressures of the world outside the academy to allow that to happen. Further, the continuous process of technological and aesthetic development means that Hollywood will continue to find new ways to seduce, bedazzle and generally persuade spectators to suspend the analytic facility in the face of the latest wonder. As a teacher, I have to acknowledge the power of this competition. I cannot, and do not wish to, permanently displace my students' pleasurable engagement with film-as-entertainment. What I do aspire to do is to induce a kind of double vision, a habit of reading palimpsestically that enables the student to read both fannishly and analytically. The student may alternate between 'fan' and 'analyst' if he or she likes to 'oscillate,' or maintain both perspectives at once if he or she can learn to tolerate the contradictions involved. Both 'common sense' ways of knowing about American film, and discipline-appropriate ones, may be held in parallel. In the long term, the initial opposition between enjoying Hollywood films and analysing them may collapse. Life-long students of American film don't cross thresholds so much as loiter in them.

Having said I am not quite satisfied with this particular aspect of Meyer and Land's description of 'liminality,' the idea of liminality in general is important. Learning to look at Hollywood film in the ways I'm asking my students to do is as much a matter of emotional maturation as it is of intellectual development and such maturation can only occur in its own time. With this understanding, I make structural provision in my course to recognise that learning may proceed in a 'recursive' fashion, with the student 'attempting different "takes" on the conceptual material' before appropriate

control is achieved.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, I use an assessment instrument that explicitly draws attention to when and how each student tightens, or slackens, his or her grip on the subject.<sup>21</sup>

What does all this theorisation mean, then, for what I do in the classroom? The following accounts of how I have taught two Hitchcock films — *Psycho* and *Shadow of a Doubt* — illustrate how I might introduce students of American film to important ‘threshold concepts’ in first year, when they might study *Psycho*, and in second or third year, when they study *Shadow of a Doubt*. These films are, for most of my students, practically fossils. As with *Casablanca*,<sup>22</sup> students are often familiar with the *legend* of *Psycho*, with its cultural presence, but may never have dealt with the film itself. They generally don’t know *Shadow of a Doubt* at all. These are very useful teaching films because students find them interesting, but otherwise have lower affective engagements with them than they would have with films closer to their time. Without the competition of affective investment, students are less likely to ‘resist’ the analytic turn. That said, in the particular sequence laid out below, several predictable ‘resistances’ arise. The first and most basic ‘threshold concept’ students must negotiate is the idea that *semiotic analysis is a valid mode of enquiry*. In fact, this idea is probably bigger than a ‘threshold concept.’ It is the entry point of the ‘episteme’ that governs most or all of the activities that are conducted in an English department, whether literary or cinematic.<sup>23</sup> Subscribing to this idea is crucial to the students’ being able to progress in the discipline, but it runs counter to their ‘training’ as movie-goers, because, until very recently, Hollywood’s conventions of verisimilitude and continuity editing encouraged spectators to disregard the artificiality and constructedness of the cinematic image. When I first introduce the practice of *mise-en-scene* analysis, students frequently voice the objection ‘You’re reading too much in!’ One of my standard rejoinders is ‘You know how much a film costs to make. It’s too expensive for anything to be there by accident, so proceed as if everything were deliberate, and then everything is available for analysis.’ Now this isn’t strictly true: there have been some very famous cinematic accidents, but according to one student, a ‘light bulb moment’ occurred for him when I pointed this out. Where this fails, showing students an image of an empty sound stage usually goes a long way to helping them see how everything they see on screen may be the result of artistic choice.

I use Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, together with the hilarious cinematic trailer he made, to debunk students’ illusions about the ‘to-be-taken-for-grantedness’ of the cinematic image in a light-hearted, energising way that helps circumvent defensiveness. In the trailer (which is now available on DVD copies of *Psycho*), Hitchcock pokes around the Bates motel, intimating that certain objects — the shower, the toilet, the picture of Susanna and the

Elders (a biblical story of voyeurism and sexual menace) — will have ‘great significance,’ but in typical Hitchcock style, he does not proceed to satisfy the curiosity thus raised.<sup>24</sup> This ‘from-the-horse’s-mouth’ evidence that the director is a conscious manipulator of the cinematic image overcomes many objections, and frames the work of analysis as a kind of detective game. The trailer is used as part of a lecture which introduces the idea of ‘learning to suspect film realism,’ and which raises key questions to ask in the process of *mise-en-scene* analysis (What kind of setting? What kind of lighting? Who’s in the light? Who’s out of it? Why? What props? Why?).<sup>25</sup> During the lecture, the students help me break down a few stills from the parlour sequence (a classic teaching ‘text’). In this scene, the apparently clean-cut Norman draws Marion Crane into his own private world, represented by his parlour. As Norman’s hobby is taxidermy, the room is decorated with a number of particularly ominous stuffed raptors, one of which literally hovering, representing Mother’s oppressive, surveilling presence. A lighting regime exploiting high contrast light and shade is also used to suggest the contrast between Marion, who is morally tainted but relatively harmless, and Norman, who is more deeply internally divided. Students then proceed to do their own detailed analysis in tutorials. In effect, this approach presents the ‘threshold concept’ that *semiotic practice is a valid mode of enquiry* by inviting students to play, which goes a long way to de-fusing resistances and to engendering the kind of curiosity that might help the passion for learning compete with the passion for ignore-ance.

Students find this detective game fun, but it is more dangerous than it looks. In learning to interrogate cinematic realism (one of Hollywood’s most seductive illusions), students are learning to interrogate the ‘truth value’ of the representation of *anything*. This can be particularly challenging when the representational medium is photographic.<sup>26</sup> It means more than becoming uncertain that the word ‘table’ invokes a similar concept for every reader, because the student may already suspect the ‘slipperiness’ of language. It means becoming uncertain that a photo of a table represents any table that ever really existed. Seeing, suddenly, comes unmoored from believing. Or does it? Can it? As Meyer and Land point out, learning to think about ‘signification’ in this way is one of the most troublesome threshold concepts there is.<sup>27</sup> This is why I adopt the tactic of ‘luring’ first year students into troublesome territory, so they’re already in it before they realise how fraught with conceptual difficulty and danger the threshold can be.

By the time students get to *Shadow of a Doubt* in Week 7 of ‘Hollywood or Bust!’, they have covered a lot of ground. They have been exposed to the rudiments of the analysis of *mise-en-scene*, editing and sound. Having worked on Eisenstein and Griffith, they are aware of the Manichaeian constructions of vice and virtue that dominated early cinema, and are primed

to perceive the moral complications Hitchcock's Catholic sensibility introduces. Having seen Lang's *M*, they know what it means when I tell them that Hitchcock trained at UFA, and was one of the European émigré directors who imported the German Expressionist habits that contributed to the *noir* sensibility of post-War American film.<sup>28</sup> And of course, as they are discussing the Studio System and its genres, students are introduced to Hitchcock as the paradigmatic 'auteur,' the kind of director who managed, by dint of 'smuggling' and 'termite art' to complicate studio-authorised ways of 'doing' realism, and of depicting America.<sup>29</sup> Students kindle to the air of cheerful subversiveness that surrounds the 'Hitchcock' persona.

From this basis, students encounter Hitchcock's sly assault on the stability and wholesomeness of the family in *Shadow of a Doubt*. The lecture frames the film in terms of the beginning of the breakdown of the war-time consensus and Hollywood's reconciliatory pattern. It discusses the various means by which Hitchcock sets up Santa Rosa as the ideal small town, and the Newtons as the ideal family, while simultaneously demonstrating how insufficient, insecure and ultimately damaging that ideal can be, built as it is on repressions. Invoking Žižek's description of the 'Hitchcockian procedure,' the lecture focuses on how Hitchcock induces a kind of double-vision in the man, or the girl, or the audience who knows too much.<sup>30</sup> The result is that everything — from the family, to the small town, to the nation — develops shadows that cast certainties and complacencies into doubt. Students will probably have developed an idea of 'America' as a complex historic and cultural construction by this time, and they may be developing sophisticated understandings of Hollywood's contribution to that construction. However, they may still be thinking of the idea of 'family' as a trans- or ahistoric institution. I complicate that by bringing home the specifically American, mid-century context of this crisis through Elsie B. Michie's 'Unveiling Maternal Desires: Hitchcock and American Domesticity.'<sup>31</sup> I also present students with excerpts from Philip Wylie's *The Generation of Vipers*, in which he vividly outlines the imagined evils of Momism, basing his argument on potentially misogynist elements of Freudian theory.<sup>32</sup> Students love Wylie's lurid and overblown prose, but they also see how it locates the apparently de-historicised insights of psychoanalysis in a particular historical, political and ideological context.

This can be intriguing stuff, but there's a lot in there, and, given that the naturalised institution 'family' is at stake, there are opportunities for defensiveness. The teaching question is: How can I anchor all this slippery and sometimes abstract material for students in a way that allows them to tackle potentially troublesome knowledge without raising defences too abruptly? Again, playing with a particularly 'fruity' moment from the film is very helpful. One such moment is the scene in which the mother of the

Newton household reveals both the idealised conception of the American family, and the insecurity of the complacencies on which it rests.<sup>33</sup> Mrs Newton lets two men into her kitchen, believing they are photo-journalists looking for a story on the perfect American wife — herself — who is to be pictured in an idealised activity— making a cake. She is blithely unaware that the men are detectives, come to investigate Charlie, the baby brother Mrs Newton has over-mothered to the point that he has become the ‘Merry Widow murderer.’ Her lack of awareness is pushed to the point of absurdity when she impedes not only the investigation, but even the photographic process that is the detectives’ cover story by insisting on adhering to the proper rules of cake-making, as if the ‘real’ edibility of the cake pictured in the magazine would matter. The resulting tensions induce laughter about Mrs Newton’s demented hyper-domesticity. They also reveal the ways in which the ideal ‘American wife’ is constructed, fabricated and mediated, in part by the ritualised domestic complacency of dim, blinkered, naïve, women like Mrs Newton, in part by those who shelter her, and in part by the glossy magazines. Mrs Newton is such a successful comic figure — at once lovable in her obtuseness, and yet frustrating and dangerous — that students enjoy workshopping this scene in tutorials. At the same time, unearthing its tensions and sub-plots helps them locate concrete manifestations of theoretical issues mobilised by reading.

This is fun, but it can also be troublesome. If such a naturalised, taken-for-granted idea as that of ‘family’ can be seen as having developed in relation to American national ideology, what does that mean for the student’s own family? Again, the student might have to revisit and remodel his or her sense of how he or she relates to ‘naturalised’ institutions in his or her life in light of insights gleaned in the course of studying Hollywood film. This may be intensified for students who are also taking other courses that interrogate constructions of subjectivity. Any of these insights is almost bound to be uncomfortable, but their intensity, and therefore student resistance, may be reduced by selecting films like *Shadow of a Doubt*, films that stage internalised critiques of the ‘officially legislated’ ideas, and that give the students some ‘wiggle room,’ some permission to displace discomfort by laughing, or talking back, while making space for new and discomfiting knowledge.

There is a limit to the impact of the academic threshold concept, but I am not sure this is really acknowledged in Meyer and Land’s formulations to date. The student’s perspective on American film *may* be permanently altered by academic perceptions. He or she *may* even think about ‘family’ or ‘entertainment’ differently, but the alteration is not necessarily all-encompassing or stable. While the transformation that results from engaging with the ‘threshold concept’ may alter how the student sees the world, it may

alter very little about how he or she lives in it. Students may take on 'troublesome knowledge,' but they are unlikely to allow academic insights to displace 'common sense' perspectives. Again, the idea of 'double-vision' is a useful way of conceiving the new perceptions students might develop.

Where 'double vision' does not develop, a common coping mechanism is for the student to deal with the disruptive potential of troublesome disciplinary knowledge by compartmentalising. He or she enters the classroom as one who temporarily 'suspends disbelief' about the patently 'counter-intuitive' or 'absurd' academic ways of knowing the course demands.<sup>34</sup> This allows the student to survive the assessment process with minimal disruption to his or her sense of self. This is described by Meyer and Land as 'a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of *mimicry* or *lack of authenticity*.'<sup>35</sup> (my emphasis) However, I question that characterisation: it seems to rely on an idealisation of subjectivity as 'stable' and 'authentic' that is becoming increasingly problematic under the pressure of contemporary theoretical examinations. The terms 'mimicry' and 'lack' carry an implication of inadequacy that is unhelpful. Implicitly, this formulation seems to require nothing less than a total, all-or-nothing conversion on the part of the student. But in my view, the student who, finally, chooses not to take academic ways of knowing about Hollywood film to heart is not to be seen as inadequate. Rather, the resilience of 'common sense' ways of seeing Hollywood film may be testament to the vigorous ways these ideas are buttressed in life outside the academy by the enormous financial and cultural economy surrounding Hollywood as an industrial concern. *If* the student's taking on troublesome knowledge effects a reconstitution of the self, it may not be a stable reconstitution. Oscillation occurs as the student moves in and out of academic contexts. And I do not see this as a problem: the student who copes by living as if he or she didn't 'know better,' or by 'suspending belief,' may have encountered and crossed one of the most crucial thresholds there is: learning to acknowledge and tolerate contradiction.

I have described an approach that lures students towards threshold concepts by inviting them to play. This reduces defensiveness and takes the heat out of the passion for ignore-ance. It may even spark intellectual curiosity, but it is not, by itself, sufficient to help students develop rigorous approaches to analysing film. I follow up with strategies that encourage students to do the kind of research and reading that will allow them to build on their playful discoveries with reference to what the scholarly community has to say about the films they watch. As Michelle Langford hints, students who enrol in film courses are *notoriously* reluctant to read.<sup>36</sup> They *consistently* register surprise when they find that there is a significant body of literature on Hollywood film, and they are often bewildered as to where to start. The idea that

studying film involves reading is not a threshold concept, but it is a significant site of resistance. Accordingly, I break the job down into incremental steps in 'Hollywood or Bust!' First, I provide a lot of leads in terms of things to read (the course textbooks; the reader; bibliographies developed by students in previous years) to demonstrate that there *is* a significant body of literature. We explicitly discuss research strategies in class, as well as means for determining the credibility of various sources. Second, each student makes a seminar presentation based on research, and shares an annotated bibliography representing that research with classmates via the course's internal website. In this way, each generation of 'Hollywood or Bust!' students operates like a little scholarly committee, developing a communal library. Further, students in successive years have access to the bibliographies compiled by previous cohorts, so a sense of shared endeavour is created. Third, I build in an exercise that strongly encourages students to start reading for their final research essay in a timely fashion. Six weeks before that essay is due, students hand in an annotated bibliography, in which they identify the question they plan to address, outline the resources they have identified, and articulate how each resource will help them address the question. They are then given feedback on the adequacy of the research effort well before the final essay is due.<sup>37</sup> This is a departure from the traditional assumption that students already know how to research and write an essay before they arrive at university, and it builds an element of explicit research and writing skills development into the course.<sup>38</sup>

If I'm doing my job, by the time students have finished their courses with me, 'America' will certainly have taken on a different complexion, as will Hollywood film. Having negotiated a number of threshold concepts, they will see 'features in a familiar landscape that were previously not discernible.'<sup>39</sup> Often, there will have been risk, loss and pain along the way, and quite a bit of 'learning as fighting.'<sup>40</sup> Because it offers ways of understanding those 'sticky moments' in student learning, Meyer and Land's theorisation of the 'threshold concept' appeals to me. There are several points at which it maps un-problematically onto the area in which I teach, but there are other points at which subtle, discipline-specific inflections need to be developed. Particularly, inferences about how and where students find new pleasures to 'compensate' them for the initial loss of their innocent enjoyments need to be developed in more detail, and more carefully. It is not the case, in my field, that the 'threshold concept' will magically bring a hitherto atomised or incoherent field into coherent focus. More needs to be done to work out why our students stay with us through processes that involve them in discomfort. As teachers who were once students, can reflect on our own moments of revelation in retrospect, but that will only tell us so much about the current generation of students. Why do they hang in there?

Perhaps we need to ask them directly, and work their answers to that question into our theorisations.

I also think the notion of ‘irreversibility’ could be more modestly expressed and the idea of liminality extended. I argue for a recognition of the possibility that the student does not so much ‘turn off’ his or her everyday ways of understanding, as willingly suspend them in the academic context, or, possibly, learn to tolerate the contradiction between two ways of knowing, which he or she goes on to hold in parallel indefinitely. Perhaps the problem is with the metaphor of the threshold itself. I suspect that the metaphor that better fits my situation is the set of prescription spectacles, which may be slipped on or off depending on the situation, or which may have a lens of a different power or colour for each eye. Or perhaps a set of binoculars, with infinitely adjustable focus, might better express the fluidity with which students may continue to ‘oscillate’ between being entertained by movies, and being analytic about them, through the rest of their lives.

Meyer and Land’s theorisation of the ‘threshold concept’ is developing traction in the literature of education, and I think it has the potential to speak to the practice of teaching Humanities subjects, including subjects central to American Studies. However, that potential has not, to my knowledge, been directly or systematically explored, because we have been largely absent from the discussion, which is sometimes *about* us, but not *by* us.<sup>41</sup> Where there is an absence, there is an opportunity. The opportunity that presents itself here is to get in on an emerging conceptualisation of teaching, and contribute to its development in ways that reflect the methods and ways of knowing specific to the several disciplines that constitute ‘American Studies.’ Perhaps there is a cultural reticence in the Humanities about talking about, and theorising, such a taken-for-granted activity as day-to-day teaching, but that reticence should be overcome.<sup>42</sup> It may feel contrived and uncomfortable at first, but it is time we started ‘writing into’ the discourse of educational theory in greater numbers, and in a more systematic way, or we will be doomed to being represented sideways by and through others’ work, with results that may not accurately reflect the subtleties of our actual situations. Until we do, we will continue to stumble over images of ourselves in the literature of education that we do not recognise as our own.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland or The Transformation*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1963, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent and comprehensive expression of their ideas, see eds. Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land, *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Langford, “The Hollywood System,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 26, 1, July 2007, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> David Perkins, 'Constructivism and troublesome knowledge,' in *Overcoming Barriers*, pp. 33-47, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasia Efklides discusses the way students' apparent familiarity with the material may lead them to have inaccurate perceptions of the difficulty of a task, and may lead the unskilled and unaware into underperforming. See Anastasia Efklides, 'Metacognition, affect and conceptual difficulty,' in *Overcoming Barriers*, pp. 48-69, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Greg M. Smith, "'It's Just a Movie:": A Teaching Essay for Introductory Media Classes,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2007, pp. 127-134.

<sup>7</sup> Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land, 'Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: an Introduction,' in *Overcoming Barriers*, pp. 3-18. p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy and the Power of Address*, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ellsworth, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Meyer and Land, 'Introduction,' pp. 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> Glynis Cousin, 'Threshold Concepts, Troublesome Knowledge and Emotional Capital: an exploration into learning about others,' in *Overcoming Barriers*, pp. 135-147, pp. 140, 141.

<sup>15</sup> Howard Hodgkin quoted in Meyer and Land, 'Introduction,' p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Gina Wisker 'Crossing Liminal Spaces: Teaching the Postcolonial Gothic,' *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture*, Vol 7, No 3, 2007, p. 413.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Simpsons,' Season 2, Episode 3, "Treehouse of Horror," 25 October 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Perkins, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer and Land, 'Liminality,' p. 25

<sup>20</sup> Ray Land, Glynis Cousin, Jan H. F. Meyer and Peter Davies. 'Conclusion: Implications of Threshold Concepts for Course Design and Evaluation,' in *Overcoming Barriers*, pp. 195-206. p. 202.

<sup>21</sup> Joy McEntee, Using "recursive feedback" in language-rich subjects, paper presented to Education Research Group Adelaide Conference, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Curtiz, 1942. See Langford, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Perkins, pp. 41-42.

<sup>24</sup> Hitchcock, *Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960. DVD Universal Studios 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edn., Pearson/Longman, New York, 2004, pp. 46-47.

<sup>26</sup> See James Monaco, 'The Language of Film: Signs and Syntax,' in *How to Read a Film*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981. pp. 120-191. See also Stephen Prince, 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory,' *Film Quarterly* Vol. 49, No. 3, Spring 1996, pp. 27-37.

<sup>27</sup> Meyer and Land, 'Introduction,' p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> On this point, students are asked to read Bettina Rosenblatt, 'Doubles and doubts in Hitchcock: The German Connection,' in *Hitchcock: Past and Future*, eds. Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 37-63.

<sup>29</sup> Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1985, p. 155. Students are also encouraged to read Robin Wood, 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur,' *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 668-678.

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Hitchcockian Blot,' in *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, eds. Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales. BFI, London, 1999, pp. 123-129, p. 124. See also Paula Marantz Cohen, 'James, Hitchcock and the Fate of Character,' *Alfred Hitchcock:*

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*Centenary Essays*, eds. Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales. BFI, London, 1999, pp. 15-27. p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Elsie B. Michie, 'Unveiling Maternal Desires: Hitchcock and American Domesticity,' in *Hitchcock's America*, eds. Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. pp. 29-53.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Wylie, "Common Women," *Generation of Vipers*, New York, Pocket Books, 1955, pp. 184-196. For accessibility, I refer students to this web representation of this chapter at <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/momism.html>> 13 November 2007

<sup>33</sup> I am indebted to Freedman and Millington's astute reading of the tensions in this scene for this idea. See Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington, 'Introduction,' in *Hitchcock's America*, eds. Jonathan Freedman and Richard Millington, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999. pp. 3-14, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Meyer and Land, 'Introduction,' p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Langford, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> I take my lead from Tara Brabazon, BA (Google): Graduating to information literacy, Keynote Paper presented to IDATER on-line conference on e-learning in Science and Design Technology, Loughborough University, 2004, <<http://idater.lboro.ac.uk/upload/BrabazonPDF.pdf>> 1 November 2007. See also Tara Brabazon, *Digital Hemlock: Internet Education and the Poisoning of Teaching*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> See Joy McEntee and Rowena Harper. 'First Years, First Marks and Rude Shocks: Developing more explicit and effective ways of preparing Humanities students for the first written assignment at University.' *International Journal of Learning* Vol. 14, No. 5, October 2007, pp. 215-223. With John Willison and other colleagues, Rowena Harper and I will be evaluating similar approaches to developing students' research skills through a Carrick Foundation funded project in 2008. See the Research Skills Development framework website at <<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/rsd/>> 10 November 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Meyer and Land, 'Liminality,' p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> John Willison, 'The Impact of a Research Vignette,' *Contemporary Qualitative Research: Exemplars for Science and Mathematics Educators*, eds. Peter Charles Taylor and John Wallace, Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2007, pp. 127-137, p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> Both English Literature and History are discussed in *Overcoming Student Barriers*, but these discussions are not subjected to interrogation by disciplinary insiders, which yields problematic results. See Meyer and Land, 'Introduction,' p. 8 and 'Liminality,' p. 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> See Ellsworth, p. 21