THE PROFESSOR AS CENSOR: CREATIVE LIMITATION AND FILM PRODUCTION PEDAGOGY

DAVID FRANKLIN

My interest in the conflict between censorship and creative limitation arises from personal experience. After my first year teaching film production at the University of Central Florida, I was disappointed with the pedestrian choices of subjects in my students' films. The students seemed drawn to narrative situations taken directly from television and other films. There were armed robberies, mobsters exchanging briefcases filled with cash, glamorous couples injecting themselves with heroin, and depressed students committing suicide. Just after the beginning of my second year of teaching, I was invited to the University of Texas at Austin to show a film at the first CinemaTexas film festival. While there, I saw many undergraduate student films that had much more imaginative choices of subject than what I was seeing from my own undergraduates. When I asked the instructor, a former classmate of mine from graduate school, how she had managed to get the students to avoid the clichés of guns, drugs, and suicides, she said, "Oh, I told them they couldn't do any of that stuff."

Creative limitation was a new concept to me at this point, but I had seen the evidence of its effectiveness with my own eyes. When I returned to Florida, it was too late to use the idea that fall. But the following spring, I introduced my film production class to what I called "The Franklin Five." To quote my syllabus, "In accordance with a similar and successful policy at the University of Texas, you will be following some basic 'rules' in your films this semester. The rules are: 1. No Guns. 2. No Suicides. 3. No Drug Deals or Overdoses. 4. No Prostitution. 5. In other words: NO CLICHÉS!" I added a note at the end of the list, "Remember: *'Limitation is the artist's best friend.'*"

The rules provoked a negative response. While only three students commented on the policy in my teaching evaluations at the end of the semester, all their comments were in the category of "The thing I like LEAST about this course." One student wrote, "I just worry that people feel limited or even censored by policies like the Franklin Five. Personally, these policies haven't affected me, but on an abstract level, I find them to be causes for concern." A second simply wrote that the thing they liked least was: "The rules." A third wrote out, "The Franklin Five." While many of the sixteen students in the class had positive reactions to the course overall, none of them identified the "Franklin Five" as something they liked about it. When I began hearing about negative student reaction to my rules from my colleagues, most of whom disagreed with my approach, I realized that my restrictions were having an impact that went well beyond my initial intentions.

David Franklin is Assistant Professor of Audio/Video/Film at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.

Nevertheless, I stuck with them for a year and a half, and my students made some very interesting films. One project even won a $2,000 prize at the Hamptons International Film Festival. While I'm not claiming credit for the students' work, I felt then, and still feel, that the imposition of the "Franklin Five" did not hinder their ability to make good films. I explained at the beginning of each semester that the rules were intended to steer them away from the clichés of student films, from topics that had been explored exhaustively by other films, and toward more original choices of subject material. Given this explanation, why did the students resist the challenge? The answer came directly from their mouths: I was censoring them.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press..." (Poore 21). While this phrase is most familiar as an excerpt from the First Amendment to the American Constitution, it is also a line from the song "Freedom of Speech" by the rap group Above the Law, which appears on the soundtrack of the 1990 youth film *Pump Up The Volume*. I offer this fact as evidence that unlike the right not to have soldiers quartered in one's home or to petition the government for a redress of grievances, both of which are also guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, freedom of speech is America's most popular freedom.

In fact, free speech is often used as a marketing tool to sell products in all branches of popular culture. For example, the successes of the cable television show "South Park" and its theatrical offspring *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* are predicated on an understanding of freedom of speech and censorship.[1] In addition to functioning as sexual innuendo, the word "uncut" in the movie's title is also used as a commercial promise of the unadulterated goods. Jack Valenti's comments in an article for *USA Today* that the MPAA "probably made a mistake on *South Park*," by not rating the film NC-17, suggest that this promise was kept (Seiler 1D). Popular music and free television also commercialize the conflict between free speech and censorship when they feature songs and soundtracks which cannot be broadcast over the air without incessant bleeping or blanking to remove so-called offensive content. Examples include songs like N.W.A.'s "Fuck the Police," which is abbreviated "F*** the Police" when it appears in print and bleeped when played on radio, and Jerry Springer's television talk show, which becomes inaudible during raucous fights because the soundtrack is obscured to remove swearing. In each case, the conspicuousness of the censorship makes the commodity more valuable to young consumers seeking the excitement of dangerous goods. This explanation is borne out by the recent drop in ratings for Jerry Springer when his program went into re-runs of earlier, tamer shows (de Moraes C7). It also explains the decision by USA network to broadcast Howard Stern's biographical film *Private Parts* with the R-rated segments blurred or bleeped, rather than the traditional editing and dubbing. Stern himself appeared on-screen to comment on the changes (Dutka F2). Even mainstream media coverage of the MPAA and its ratings system increases commercial interest in films by calling attention to filmmakers' struggles with this conservative, quasi-independent organization, which is usually portrayed as out of step with audiences. For an example, look at the controversy about digitally generated figures in the foreground of several shots in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (Weinraub E13). A statement denouncing the MPAA as a "force of censorship" was issued by the

New York Film Critics Circle at the time of the film's release (Dutka F2). And the Los Angeles Film Critics Association said the *Eyes Wide Shut* incident "once again proves the deeply chilling effect the ratings system is having on creative expression in film" (King F54).[2]

In the University, the concept of film censorship is explored in detail by film history courses where students are introduced to the Hays Production Code, the precursor to the MPAA ratings system. The history of studio filmmaking from the 1920s to the 1960s is portrayed in popular texts, such as *Film History: An Introduction,* as a struggle between external censors and self-censorship organizations set up by the Hollywood industry to protect themselves from outside interference (Bordwell & Thompson 239-240). But even a complex account like Bordwell and Thompson's, which explains that the Hays office was a creation of the film studios and received its operating budget from them (as the current MPAA does), emphasizes the idea that movies were engaged in an ongoing battle against censorship throughout this period. The liberalization of film content in the late 1960s is presented in this context as a loosening of these restrictions. To understand how these facts appear to students, consider the following account from the introduction to *Film School Confidential,* written by two graduates of NYU's film program:

> The 1960s had seen the most revolutionary changes in the film industry since the advent of sound. The omnipotent studio system that had ruled Hollywood for six decades devoured itself, taking with it the Hayes (sic) code that had dictated much of the content that could be put into films. Filmmakers were suddenly free of the cheerfulness and wholesomeness that had been forced upon them for as long as anyone could remember, and they gleefully began to see how much pain and despair they could pack into their films (Edgar & Kelly, "Introduction").

While the passage's attempt to imply that Hollywood films were free of "pain and despair" prior to the 1960s is patently ridiculous, what is more important is the way it reflects an ideological belief in the intrinsic value of free speech. The language portrays filmmakers as bursting at the seams to be free of the restrictions of censorship. From this ideological position, the loosening of restrictions results in "glee." Free speech is good purely because it promotes free expression of what filmmakers truly want to say. Freedom from the imposition of "cheerfulness and wholesomeness" is good because these things are antithetical to true art. The corollary to this set of beliefs is that only hard-hearted censors and moralizing prudes want to restrict the free expression of ideas. Students have adopted this ideology wholesale, as my experiences with the "Franklin Five" confirm.[3] But the issues are not as simple as the ideology of free speech makes them appear.

I have argued above that the belief in free speech as an intrinsic good that trumps all other concerns creates an atmosphere that is generally hostile to limitation. But there is an additional hurdle to be overcome before limitation can be embraced. In the specific context of the film production classroom, the ideology of free speech interacts powerfully with students' beliefs about the instinctive and individualistic nature of artistic authorship.

A cursory glance at contemporary media will confirm that popular accounts of filmmaking have become increasingly focused on individual authorship since the 1960s (Bordwell & Thompson, *Film History: An*

Introduction 514-515). Directors are elevated to brandname status earlier and earlier in their careers, hence the television ads that announced "*The Rock*: A Film by Michael Bay" at a time when he had only directed one previous feature (1995's *Bad Boys*). Film students envision themselves as continuing this *auteur* tradition. As *Film School Confidential* puts it, "If you are going to film school, you probably want to be a director" (Edgar & Kelly, "Introduction").

Unlike collaborative models of creativity, the auteurist slant of contemporary film criticism and publicity encourages students to think of themselves as individual artists preparing to put their personal stamp on film. While it is tempting to blame this belief system on Andrew Sarris and the current promotional press, the ideology of individual artistic authorship has a history that predates both the contemporary hype machine and the auteur theory. Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter, in their 1981 article "The woman with the movie camera," note that "Since the Romantic period Western artists have tended to define themselves as outsiders, alienated and misunderstood. Such artists (including filmmakers) are stereotypically eccentric, obsessive, and seemingly unconcerned with daily material realities..." (61).[4] Thus the artist is conceived of as a single person, unconnected to a social network or collaborative framework. Citron and Seiter go on to state, "In the visual arts, an incapacity to discuss one's work becomes the 'genius' hallmark. The experience of making art seems so personal and complex it cannot possibly be articulated" (ibid). In other words, this tradition sees filmmaking as a way to express the individual student's own personal vision, and, perhaps more important for my argument, sees this vision as so special and unique that discussing it seems beside the point. The inspirational message of *Film School Confidential* is a perfect embodiment of this ideology: "You will make powerful, intelligent films that no one but you could ever make. You are the future of this industry, the future of this most visceral of art forms, the future of entertainment. Welcome aboard! We can't wait to see your first film" (Edgar & Kelly, "Film Schools and Hollywood")

The belief that individual artists express uniquely personal visions of the world is supported by the language used in promoting contemporary film education. Consider the following message from the University of Southern California's Dean Elizabeth Daly about The School of Cinema-Television: "It is a place to learn your craft and find your voice." Or the American Film Institute's director, Frank Pierson, writing about the American Film Institute: "At AFI, the artistic voice is nurtured and aided in its evolution." To take an example from the classroom, Jeff Rush of Temple University writes about his own course: "'Narrative Film: Theory and Practice' is a graduate-level seminar designed to help students gain command of the conventions and nuances of narrative filmmaking, while at the same time encouraging them to critique these conventions as they begin developing an emergent voice of their own." (48). The idea of film school as a place to develop a unique "voice" is repeated in all three statements.

Yet Citron and Seiter write "as teachers and filmmakers ourselves, we consider it very important to debunk the romantic myth of the individual artist" (61). Why? They explain that "In the Romantic tradition, art and creativity are perceived as the result of uncontrollable urges and they seemingly have nothing to do with work." They go on to say, "Each attribute, if adopted by the student in their concept of their own role,

serves to close students' minds in a learning situation and restricts any sense of community developing in the classroom" (ibid). In other words, this romantic concept of art as an instinctive expression of the artist's inner truth places the artwork outside the framework of rational discussion and debate. If the artist is merely "expressing" his or her inner self, then all forms of expression have equal validity, and any criticism of that expression becomes a form of character assassination. Freedom of speech in this context means the freedom to say whatever is inside the artist, without concern for the consequences. Here the ideology of free speech combines with the ideology of authorship to support students who believe both in their right to say whatever is inside them and in the intrinsic artistic value of that expression.

Part of the problem is the fact that currently accepted theoretical beliefs in academe about the nature of artistic production have not penetrated mainstream consciousness. And students coming into a class that presumes certain theoretical positions vis-à-vis the nature of artistic production that differ from their own are bound to act out this conflict in the context of the class. The idea of the genius artist, though it has been thoroughly debunked in current social theory, is still pervasive. Yet as Citron and Seiter have argued above, and as Janet Wolff argues in *The Social Production of Art,* this notion of an unconstrained, freely creative artist is simply not a supportable interpretation of the historical facts.[5] Students may think that they are acting on their own, from their own "internal impulses," but this is only because they have not yet been exposed to an explication of the larger mechanisms at work in the artistic process. Wolff puts it this way:

> "The artist in the pre-modern period was, as we would see it, severely constrained by political and financial pressures to paint or write in rather narrowly defined ways, and following instructions from patrons or sponsors. Before the modern idea of artist-as-genius, such interference did not appear in the least unacceptable. However, I shall also argue that it has *never* been true, and is not true today, that the artist has worked in isolation from social and political constraints of a direct or indirect kind." (27)

Wolff's book is an attempt to situate artistic practice within the context of the social reality in which it is produced. Her argument is that artists are inevitably reflecting the conditions, social, material, and ideological, in which their work is produced. Any notion that an artist is making work that is outside of history, or without reference to the world in which the artist lives, is a fiction says Wolff, "Because it usually depends on an unanalytical concept of the subject (as 'free' and creative)" (123). Of course, the artist never really is. For not only are there ideological factors which influence any artistic product of a particular artist at a particular time, there are also aesthetic conventions that interact with that ideology (Wolff, 119).[6] Wolff explains: "The ideas and values of the artist, themselves socially formed, are mediated by literary and cultural conventions of style, language, genre, and aesthetic vocabulary." (65) Wolff doesn't attempt to deny the importance of the artist in the creation of the artwork. She is not perpetuating the "death of the author" notion which circulated in the 1960s. But she does make the point that despite the artist being the person who does the physical and mental work of creation, authorship consists of multiple other factors which interact with the individual consciousness of the artist. In other words, students who conceive of themselves exclusively as free-thinking, independent creative agents are misunderstanding the nature of creative work and

subscribing to a theory of art which has been roundly criticized by contemporary theorists on the subject.

The teaching of film production, however, is often performed outside any awareness of contemporary social theory. In my experience, cultural studies rarely make it as far as the film production classroom. But if one ignores contemporary theory and assumes that film students *are* in fact completely independent, free-thinking agents, then what need do they have for a university education? If all that matters is what is inside the artist, then why do film courses or those of any other artistic discipline at the college level attempt to teach these "artists?" If the answer is "because they don't know how to work the equipment" then we are talking about vocational training, not education as I understand it. Yet technical training without the burden of additional theoretical edifices or restrictions is exactly what many students demand. The belief that art consists of pure self-expression is central to many students' reasons for studying film in the first place. They believe they have something to say and believe it is the teacher's job to teach them how to say it. It is not the teacher's job to challenge what they have to say or help to shape it in any way. This belief is, like the belief in the intrinsic value of free speech, a cherished truth. When challenged, as it was by the "Franklin Five" restrictions, this belief can arouse passionate disagreement.

So what justification can be offered for limiting the content of students' works? How can interfering with their authorship, their personal expression, ever be allowed? While the freedom of speech is an extremely familiar concept, the so-called "freedom to teach," spelled out in the magazine *Academe,* is not ("Academic Freedom in Medical School," 61).[7] That freedom, endorsed by the American Association of University Professors, includes such basics as "The right of the faculty to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance" (Ibid)[8] Imposing creative limits on student work as a part of the design of the course would appear to fall within those parameters. But while the concept of censorship has a popular profile, the idea of creative limitation does not. A search of the past four years in the *Index of Film Literature* produced one hundred and twenty five citations for articles about censorship and film. A review of the same years for creative limitation came up blank.[9] Given the absence of a popular understanding of creative limitation, its use as a rationale for inhibiting free speech requires some support.

Creative limitation is not always controversial. Not every limit is identical to the content restrictions included in the "Franklin Five." A far more common form of creative limitation is what might be called "technical" limitation. This is the practice of limiting students to films of five or ten minutes, 16mm format, black and white film stock, etc.[10] While these limits appear neutral, even practical, they are significant because they demonstrate the general acceptability of limitation within specific boundaries.

When the boundaries are expanded into the realm of subject material, the imposition of limits becomes more problematic. Because of students' ideological beliefs in their own independent artistic voices and the intrinsic value of free speech, the instinctive response to such limitation is to call it censorship. The reason that technical limits are not subject to this same response is that students (and many instructors) conceptually separate the technical elements of filmmaking from subject material, or content. In my own experience at

the University of Texas at Austin, I had a production instructor who told the class that she could not grade our films on what they were about, she could only grade how well they were made. Citron and Seiter describe a similar situation when they write that, "traditional film teaching emphasizes aesthetics and technique and ignores content" (61). The result of this division is that content is left up to the individual student, who then has the freedom to express whatever is "inside" them. When challenged, students can defend their expression by invoking the freedom of speech.

Yet contemporary Film Studies reject the division of form and content. One of the most popular film texts in American Universities, Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction,* addresses the question as follows: "Very often people assume that 'form' as a concept is the opposite of something called 'content.' This assumption implies that a poem or a musical piece or a film is like a jug. An external shape, the jug *contains* something that could just as easily be held in a cup or a pail... We do not accept this assumption" (67). They go on to state: "We shall treat as formal elements many things that some people consider content. From our standpoint, subject matter and abstract ideas all enter into the total system of the artwork" (ibid). Similarly, Citron and Seiter assert that the film production instructor "Must reject any approach to film teaching which separates form from content. Such a formalist division is ideological" (61). Jeff Rush, in his aforementioned course file, utilizes an exercise to show students the inextricability of form and content by having them copy the shots and edits from a finished film and try to write a new story to go with them. "No matter how students attempt to push it in other directions, they discover that there are limits to what they can change while remaining within [the same shot pattern as the original scene]" (59).

I agree with this concept of a unified "total system of the artwork," and contend that the only distinction between restricting form and restricting content is that the latter has more powerful ideological implications than the former. While restricting a film to black and white film stock or five minutes in length is generally acceptable to students, restricting entire categories of images and actions on screen brings with it uncomfortable and inescapable echoes of the Hays Production Code and its explicit list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" (Katz, 934). Students rightly feel that the meaning of their films will be affected. What is easily ignored is that the restriction of technical aspects of film like stock, color, sound, and length already affects the meaning of the students' films. To cite one example, the technical limitation of takes no longer than 30 seconds, to which all students who use Bolex hand-cranked, Krasnogorsk-3 and Bell & Howell cameras are subject, effectively rules out the slow, meditative camera movements of an Andrei Tarkovsky film or the meticulously choreographed long takes favored by Miklos Jansco or Orson Welles. Students are shoehorned into a Montage style of filmmaking, building each scene out of multiple shots rather than letting the action unfold in a single take. Thus an entire realm of expressive technique is off-limits and out of bounds, purely because of the passive restriction imposed by technology.

In fact, in recent years, Film Studies has become increasingly aware of the control exerted over meaning by technology. Beginning with Jean-Louis Baudry and the psychoanalytic writers of the 1970s, who persuasively analyzed the meanings created

by the film apparatus, writers like Laura Mulvey and others have asserted that the film camera and projector are anything but neutral (Rosen). At the logical conclusion of this line of argument comes Brian Winston's *Technologies of Seeing,* which argues that not only does film technology have ideological implications, but that its very invention was the product of ideological forces (1). So although the control exerted by the cinematic apparatus on the meanings of film remains outside the interest of the mainstream media, and therefore most beginning students, there is a long and well-established scholarly tradition asserting that such control exists.[11] In the practical terms of a film class, this means that requiring students to work in 16mm, or in black and white, or without the benefit of lighting, or without wide angle lenses (as cameras with built-in zoom lenses do), changes the meaning of the films that they make. The fact that these limits are imposed without *intending* to tamper with students' free expression does not mean that they do not. Limitation, whether imposed upon the instructor by circumstance or intentionally chosen, is an inescapable part of teaching film production.

So why is the restriction of content a more touchy subject than restriction of form? Bordwell and Thompson assert that the two are inextricably linked. And yet the reactions of my students and colleagues to the Franklin Five limitations were clearly different from their reactions to the above-mentioned technical limitations, which I also employ regularly. In order to understand the indignation that content restriction arouses, it is necessary to understand that beliefs about authorship and free speech tap into something more important than mere theories about artistic production. They tap into nationalistic beliefs about America, the capitalist system, and the importance of individual liberty.

As a professor trying to teach students how to make narrative films, I find that these ideologies systematically overvalue individual authorship and free speech at the expense of other, equally valid, concerns. The fetishization of authorship, for example, is an outgrowth of the cult of the individual that characterizes American culture. The "American Dream" of wealth and success is predicated on a vision of the individual as socially and economically mobile and unconnected to other individuals. Artistic models of creativity in which the artwork is a product of teamwork or in which the artist relies on collaborators to help create the artwork do not fit into this stereotype. Thus the understanding of what a filmmaker does is ideologically determined to fit the *auteur* model, despite the fact that filmmakers themselves regularly criticize this model as overly simplistic (Lumet, 51).[12]

The idea of free speech is also overvalued for ideological reasons. From grade school onward, Americans are taught that what separates their country from other countries around the world is that they have the right to say anything without fear of persecution. But speech in American media, despite the Constitution, IS heavily restricted.[13] Although there are political guarantees of free speech for individuals, anyone who has tried to secure distribution for an independent film knows that conveying that speech to an audience is anything but free. The operations of market forces dictate the choices that distribution companies make about which films they will purchase for release to theaters, how they will advertise those films, and what kind of a release pattern will be followed. Even earlier in the process, a commercial set of criteria is applied to every film script proposed for funding. Companies decide which films to make based on what they think will make money in the marketplace. This system

amounts to a form of economic censorship in which films that have elements deemed "uncommercial" are denied funding while those with more "commercial" elements are given the go-ahead. A succinct description of this process can be found in the dialogue of the film *The Player*. In it, a studio executive explains why a film was not produced: "It lacked certain elements that we need to make a film financially successful... Suspense, laughter, violence, hope, heart, nudity, sex, happy endings. Mainly happy endings." Filmmakers who have been frustrated by this system have been much less vocal than those decrying traditional forms of censorship. But the argument has been made. Alexander Payne, a 1999 Oscar nominee and winner of the 1999 Independent Spirit Award for Best Director for his film *Election*, recently attacked the system as follows: "Being a young American filmmaker is worse than making films under Communism, because the commercial and ideological exigencies are so strict that they suppress creativity" (Biskind, 16).

Yet perhaps because they are the products of market forces, these "commercial and ideological exigencies" seem natural from an American perspective. But if the range of topics of films released commercially in any given year is sampled, it becomes clear that the same topics are being addressed again and again. Teenage sex comedies, haunted houses, man-eating sharks or alligators, etc., are repeated ad nauseam, while other subjects are simply never broached at all. Because this economic censorship is not authoritarian, not directed by an intelligent person or persons, it does not seem to violate the tradition of free expression. But it stifles the expression of creative ideas just as surely as state-sponsored censorship in China or Saudi Arabia. Confusingly, this current form of economic censorship in America is not driven by the same moral principles as those that structured restrictions imposed historically by the Hays office or the Catholic Legion of Decency. It is in fact an inversion of those principles, i.e., sex and violence sell tickets, but piety does not. This emphasis on previously taboo subject material makes the system appear to be less restrictive than it is. The ideology of free speech as an intrinsic good obscures the fact that the operation of the free market results in a very limited set of themes for mainstream movies.

As Wolff's model of the structuring power of ideology and aesthetic convention would predict, students who have been repeatedly exposed to mainstream film adopt its models as their own preferred mode of self-expression. The result is a sameness in student films which echoes the sameness of Hollywood's product. As former UFVA President Raymond Fielding has written about film educators, "For the last half-century, we have been very good at emulating what the film/TV world has already been doing. Our capacity for imitation has been far better developed than our commitment to innovation"(76). In order to jump-start innovation, a tool forceful enough to counteract free market commercialism must be found. I believe creative limitation can function as such a tool, and I am not alone in adopting this strategy.

The most famous recent example of creative limitation in film is the Dogma 95 collective from Denmark, which includes directors Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. The group's self-described manifesto is available at their own web site on the internet and has been circulated and commented upon widely (Dogme95). The manifesto asserts, among other things, that: "As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise. The result is barren. An illusion of

pathos and an illusion of love." The manifesto goes on to say that "DOGME 95 counters the film of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc., must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
10. The director must not be credited."

While Von Trier's on-screen monologue at the end of *The Kingdom* makes clear his fondness for practical jokes, the evidence that these rules were meant at least half seriously can be seen by watching Vinterberg's *The Celebration*. In it, the director uses the Vow of Chastity to create a vivid and engaging family psychodrama, which won the Grand Jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998. Geoffry Macnab, interviewing Vinterberg in *Sight and Sound*, sums it up this way, "A provocation on one level, a wonderful marketing tool on another, the *Dogma* manifesto is, according to Vinterberg, designed to enable its followers to move away from bloated, cliché-ridden, formulaic filmmaking. To make a *Dogma* film, he argues, requires resourcefulness and imagination. It is a case both of getting around the obstacles you have put in front of yourself and using those obstacles as your inspiration. 'When we were playing around with the idea, I found it extremely inspiring,' Vinterberg claims. 'Limitations have always been a major source of inspiration'"(17).

More recently, as the number of Dogma films has proliferated, and American directors like Harmony Korine and Paul Morrissey have joined the "brotherhood," there has been an increasingly suspicious tone in the press coverage received by the Dogma filmmakers. Soren Kragh-Jacobsen, who directed *Mifune*, was interviewed by *The New York Times* when his film was released in February 2000. Writing about the fact that Kragh-Jacobsen, Von Trier, and Vinterberg will be abandoning the Dogma 95 rules for their next productions, Alan Riding raises the question of "whether Dogma represented a genuine conversion to low-tech moviemaking or simply a clever gimmick"(13). Since Riding's article, Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, his non-Dogma production, received the Palme D'Or at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival. A profile published just before the festival addresses the question of abandoning the Dogma rules this way: "Von Trier likens making a Dogma movie to visiting a spa—it's meant to be a tonic rather than a way of life"(Durbin, 44). In other words, the question of whether Dogma was meant to be taken seriously is not as important as recognizing the good it can do in the context of bloated, formulaic, commercial film production.

One of the original goals of the Dogma 95 filmmakers was to break out of "cliché-ridden, formulaic filmmaking." This was the same goal I had for my students when I first assigned the "Franklin Five". The fifth rule, after all, was "no clichés." But in order to justify the exclusion of clichés, it is important to explain exactly what I mean by the word. Stephen Minot, in his introductory writing text *Three Genres,* explains it as follows: "The cliché, as George Orwell pointed out in 'Politics and the English Language,' is actually a dying metaphor, that is, an expression which was once fresh enough to create a clear picture in the reader's mind, but has now lost its vitality" (75). Clichés are situations and techniques that are so familiar that the audience no longer takes them in anew. This is the opposite of the Russian Formalist admonition that "In art, material must be alive and precious" (Schklovsky, 42-43). That is, the artwork should make its world fresh and vivid to its audience. In contrast, clichés are merely perceived and understood, without making any impact whatsoever. Clichés are obvious: the hooker with the heart of gold, the reluctant hero, the awkward freshman. But that obviousness doesn't keep them from appearing in student films on a regular basis.

Students themselves have begun to recognize the danger of clichés, and some of them have started a website to help rectify the situation. It's called D.U.M.P.S., or "Directing Unsuccessful Motion Picture Shorts." Written by the staff of Filmmaker.com, some of whom are film students at Florida State University, the site frames itself as advice to student filmmakers:

> D.U.M.P.S. contains *not* the usual advice you get in film school about the elements of good screenwriting.No, no. Rather, it is a *very specific list* of common mistakes and trends which we've seen in crappy student films again and again at screening after screening. *Before you even think of making a student film, read this list.* If you're a genius, then go ahead—break these rules. But let's face it, if you think you're a genius, you're not. So play it safe and spare your audiences the uneasy task of having to lie when you ask, "So, what did you think?"

The prohibitions are worded as categories rather than rules. Examples include: "Look at me, I'm a director!' shots," "The One Joke Film," "The zany 'Slacker With A Gun' film," "Shooting into Mirrors," and "The Tortured Artist Film." The intent of the site is summarized by the webmaster:

> I do not expect that student films are going to be perfect — that's the whole point of a student film, to make mistakes. However, as I've said previously, students (including myself!) have had a tendency to do the same thing over and over and make the same mistakes again and again, to the point that they can be put down in a list as above. The purpose of these pages [is] to make student filmmakers aware of the kind of critical coverage to which their films may be exposed.

But despite this articulate defense of limitation as a tool for achieving originality, the list generates a large volume of disapproving e-mails on the response board posted below the main site. For these authors, any kind of specific content prohibition, however practical, powerfully contradicts their beliefs in the intrinsic value of free speech and authorship.

One writer argues that the list is an "attempt to manipulate and restrain creativity" ("D.U.M.P.S.," Giatti).[14] Here, the author is

reverting to the Romantic model of creativity as instinctive and unfettered by outside forces. Another respondent writes, "So you about covered everything that a student can think of, so what the hell can a short film be about?" ("D.U.M.P.S.," DuBois) Here the domination of repetitive commercial models is internalized and the criticism of those models taken personally. A third respondent feels that "I don't think there's much to be learned about the craft by making exhaustive, dogmatic lists of what not to do" ("D.U.M.P.S.," McCamic). The language of this reply, i.e., "exhaustive" and "dogmatic," while used correctly, reflects a negative view of any limitation. This negativity is taken further by someone using the name "Magister Jedi," who writes: "MY ONLY COMMENT: FUCK EVERYONE AND MAKE WHAT YOU WANNA MAKE. USE YOUR INSTINCTS... MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU." Here the "instincts" of the author are explicitly linked to Hollywood films by the "may the force be with you" reference. The admonition to "fuck everyone and make what you wanna make" reflects anger and frustration at the impingement on free speech that the D.U.M.P.S. list represents, and suggests that the artist's instinctive desires are all that matter.

As I have already argued, the economic determination of which ideas will enter the mainstream of American cinema means that there is an inherent tendency in film to repeat the past (insofar as the past was a commercial success). This repetition includes technical processes, as with morphing and other special effects, and narrative elements, as with the slasher film and other genres. This repetition, viewed over the course of a lifetime of media consumption, can influence students into unreflectively reproducing these same mainstream forms. What is required is education that helps students to recognize the process by which certain forms are privileged over others. Citron and Seiter state that "because so much of a production teacher's job involves teaching conventions, s/he must learn to present film techniques as historical and constructed within ideology" (61).

In Raymond Fielding's previously quoted comments, he goes on to say of film/TV, "It would seem we are almost alone among disciplines in higher education in being content to copy conventional ideals and practices rather than carve a path on the cutting edge of creativity and technology" (76). If the discipline is to reverse this trend, teachers must find ways to stimulate students to go beyond mere imitations. Other disciplines in the arts and humanities accept the use of creative limitations as a tool to force students to work in ways that are at first unfamiliar, but which they soon learn are productive. For example, an art course at Syracuse University requires students to paint a picture without using the color red, as a way to abstract from the literal reproduction of reality. Expository writing courses at the University of Central Florida prohibit argumentative papers on the death penalty or abortion, on the principle that both sides of both arguments are so well known that the students will not be contributing anything to the debate. The Creative Writing textbook *What If?* features an assignment in which students must write a story from the point of view of a narrator whose sex is the opposite of their own, as a means of getting the student to see the world from a distinctly new perspective (Bernays & Painter, 76-78).

I admit that finding a way to utilize these kinds of assignments within the format of most 16mm film production courses is a challenge. Entire semesters are often devoted to a single film project, rather than the series of exercises that might be assigned in

a drawing class, for example. For this reason, it is difficult to use limitation in exactly the same way as the assignments described above. But just because creative limitation is difficult to implement in a film production class, does not mean it should be dismissed. Despite all the opposition outlined in this paper, I still believe that limitations intended to diversify the range of expression in student films are a worthy undertaking.

From the reactions of some of my colleagues who have read this paper, I know it is possible that the reader has reached this point and remains unconvinced. The fundamental question of free expression remains at the fore, undimmed in its intensity and unshakable in its claim on first priority over all other concerns. It is not the intent of this paper to argue that freedom of speech is not an important right. Clearly it is essential in a free society to preserve the political right to dissent. But the resistance of students like those writing in to the D.U.M.P.S. website, or who disliked the "Franklin Five," is not driven by the desire to dissent. Rather it is motivated by the desire to rebel in exactly the same way as everybody else.

The situation mirrors the scene in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* in which Brian tries to get the mob to stop chasing him everywhere. "You are all individuals!" he calls down to them. The crowd answers him with one voice: "Yes! We are all individuals!" (Chapter 14, 3:40.) Here the herd mentality is given the name "individualism" for the same reason that a 90's genre of popular music is called "alternative."

The promotion of rebellion and controversial subject material in the mainstream media overvalues the importance of free speech for commercial reasons. The selling of film schools as sites for the development of a personal artistic voice, as well as the auteurist slant of mainstream film journalism, further contributes to the valuation of the individual student's choice of subject and approach. These forces also devalue the professor's contribution to the educational process.[15] As a result, limitations imposed by professors on student films that conflict with students' own visions for these films are easily denounced as censorship, even in cases when there is a clear, pedagogically appropriate reason for their imposition.

But creative limitation differs from censorship. Unlike a government decree or an economic system, it is not pervasive. It is not enforced outside the specific course or assignment to which it applies and can be deviated from in any work the student does away from that venue. It is not lasting nor is it oppressive. It is imposed only to stimulate students to take their work in new directions, and its imposition is only made necessary by the dominance of mainstream media in the imaginations of those students.

The argument in favor of "free speech" in the classroom obscures the influence of commercial products on what students freely choose to produce as personal expression. It proposes that the students' freedom of speech is more important than the instructor's freedom to teach. It reproduces an antiquated model of film instruction in which all that is being taught is technical skills, without regard for the meaning and implication of those skills or the subjects that they will be used to communicate. If film production is taught this way, the instructor abdicates his or her responsibility to help students make their films speak in authentic and audible voices and escape the deadening influence of clichés. If film instruction as a discipline is to rise to the challenge to innovate, it must find tools

strong enough to resist the forces that demand conformity. Creative limitation is just such a tool.

Notes

[1] Near the end of the feature film, Kyle has a speech in which he passionately says: "This is about freedom of speech, this is about censorship," then, trailing off, adds, "and stuff." The speech is both self-mocking and an expression of the fundamental grounding for the film, which is about kids sneaking into an "R" rated movie that incenses their parents into starting a war with Canada, where the offensive film originated.

[2] See also the extensive media coverage of *Dogma* (1999) and *Kids* (1996) as examples of the ways the press covers clashes between filmmakers and the ratings board.

[3] Further confirmation can be found in Andy Seiler's "'South Park' bigger, longer, and nearly NC-17," in which high school senior Michael Acuba is quoted as calling the MPAA "prudish."

[4] The original intent of Citron and Seiter's article is to lobby for pedagogical practices that are less sexist and more empowering to women. I have abstracted somewhat from the original feminist slant of the piece.

[5] In her excellent book-length discussion of the complex social factors which surround the production of artworks, Wolff both responds to and builds on the theories of Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, et al., creating a coherent argument about the many factors that interact during the process of making art.

[6] If a student's claims that his or her work is free of ideology, I would point them to the passage on this page that states: "Ideas and beliefs which are proposed as value-free or non-partisan are merely those ideas that have assumed the guise of universality, perceiving as natural social facts and relations which are in fact historically specific."

[7] A report to the AAUP by participants in the conference on Academic Values in the Transformation of Academic Medicine. While not directly meant as a statement on all disciplines, the report includes a section with the striking heading "Freedom to Teach," which *is* generally applicable.

[8] The full quotation is: "The freedom to teach includes the right of the faculty to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance in teaching activities for which they are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean or other administrative officer."

[9] Nor were any citations found by searching for "limitation" by itself, or even "restriction" alone.

[10] The only two film production syllabi available on the University of Alabama's Screensite are typical in this respect: "FILM 350: Advanced Production (16mm)" by Clarke Mackey of Queen's University and "TCF 140 Film Fundamentals" by Jeremy Butler of the University of Alabama. FILM 350 limits final projects to five minutes on 16mm film, with a mixed soundtrack. In TCF 140, students work in groups to produce final projects of ten minutes, on 16mm black and white stock. In my own experience at NYU and the University of Texas at Austin as a student, and the University of Central Florida and Hofstra University as an instructor, I have found that similar limits are imposed in every class I took or observed others teaching.

[11] The only exception to this general disinterest was a brief flirtation with McLuhan's phrase "The Medium Is The Message" in the 1960s and '70s.

[12] Lumet is only one voice in this debate, but there are plenty of others — see Eric Sherman's *Directing the Film: Film Directors on their Art* for additional opinions.

[13] For a book-length argument on political restriction of free speech in a democratic society, see Herman & Chomsky.

[14] The editor's response includes the statement: "You're missing the point. This list is not about restraining creativity but about encouraging it... There does seem to be a value in talking about these issues. Take it or leave it — we believe it's better to understand and recognize common trends and/or pitfalls than to just ignore them."

[15] See particularly *Film School Confidential* for confirmation of this attitude.

Works Cited

"Academic Freedom in the Medical School." *Academe.* 85.4. 1999: 61.

Bernays, Anne and Pam Painter. *What If?* New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995.

Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* New York: McGraw Hill, 1997.

Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film History: An Introduction.* New York: McGraw Hill, 1994.

Butler, Jeremy. "TCF 140 Film Fundamentals." University of Alabama. <http://www.tcf.ua. edu/screensite/ teach/syl/>.

Citron, Michelle and Ellen Seiter. "The woman with the movie camera." *Jump Cut* 26 (1981): 61-62.

Daly, Elizabeth. "Dean's Welcome". <http://www.usc.edu/schools/cntr/overview_f. html>.

de Moraes, Lisa. "Viewers May Bail Out as Springer Cleans Up His Act." *The Washington Post* 31, May 1999: C7.

Dogme95 Collective. "The Vow of Chastity." <http://www. dogme95.dk>.

"D.U.M.P.S." <http://www.filmmaker.com/ dumps>.

Durbin, Karen. "Making the Waves." *The New York Times Magazine,* 30 April 2000: 44.

Dutka, Elaine. "Morning Report." *The Los Angeles Times,* 27 July 1999: F2.

Edgar, Tom and Kelly, Karin. *Film School Confidential.* New York: Putnam. 1997.

Fielding, Raymond. "President's Forum." *Journal of Film and Video.* 49. 3 (1997): 76.

Film Literature Index. Vols.23-26. Albany: Filmdex, 1995-1998.

Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media.* New York: Pantheon, 1988.

Katz, Ephraim. *The Film Encyclopedia.* New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

King, Susan. "Morning Report." *The Los Angeles Times,* 22 July 1999: F54.

Lumet, Sidney. *Making Movies.* New York: Vintage, 1995.

Mackey, Clarke. "FILM 350: Advanced Production (16mm)." Queen's University. <http://www.tcf.ua. edu/screensite/teach/syl/>.

Macnab, Geoffry. "The Big Tease." *Sight and Sound.* 9.2 (1999): 17.

Minot, Stephen. *Three Genres.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971.

Monty Python's Life of Brian, 1979. Criterion Collection DVD,

Pierson, Frank. "Introduction to 1999-2000 catalog." <http://www.afionline.org>.

Poore, B. P., Ed. *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the United States.* Vol. 1. Washington : G.P.O., 1878.

Riding, Alan. "Recipe for Joy: Danish Dogma Plus Samurai." *The New York Times,* 20 February 2000: 2, 13

Rosen, Phil. ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Rush, Jeff. "Course File for Narrative Film: Theory and Practice." *Journal of Film and Video,* 49.3 (1997): 48-67.

Schklovsky, Viktor, "The Resurrection of the Word" *Russian Formalism.* ed. Bann, Stephen and Bowlt, John. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

Seiler, Andy. "'South Park' bigger, longer, and nearly NC-17." *USA Today,* 20 July 1999: 1D.

Sherman, Eric. *Directing the Film: Film Directors on their Art.* Los Angeles, CA: Acrobat Books, 1979.

The Player, Dir. Robert Altman, New Line Cinema. 1992.

Weinraub, Bernard. "At The Movies: Kubrick, Edited." *The New York Times,* 16 July 1999: E13.

Winston, Brian. *Technologies of Seeing.* London: BFI, 1996.

Wolff, Janet. *The Social Production of Art.* New York: New York University Press, 1993.