

Curtis Marez, *University Babylon: Film and Race Politics on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 250 pp.

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Curtis Marez's *University Babylon: Film and Race Politics on Campus* interrogates the university in the US as an institutional space devoted to reproducing racial capital and the politics of respectability, a space historically rooted in the theft of Native lands and the financial webs of slavery. Bringing critical university studies into dynamic conversation with critical ethnic studies, Marez convincingly delineates how a particular idea of the university has served—and continues to serve—to define belonging and merit on college campuses in terms of white supremacy and patriarchal heteronormativity. Recursively highlighting these central motifs, the author provides a trenchant and timely overarching critical history, spurred along by discussions of films about colleges and college students, or, in some cases, of films featuring actors or made by directors with notable collegiate connections.

As in the first chapter, which looks at representation of Indigenous people and people of color as college students and graduates in silent-era films, these readings emphasize the dominant role of US cinema in constructing the university as a hierarchical space. For Marez, Hollywood films are distorted mirrors of modern universities: the screen's fantasies and ideologies reflect how universities have wanted to see themselves, in a way that, in turn, shapes them as institutions and physical places. At the same time, Marez crucially leaves open the possibility that screen representation can disrupt this feedback loop; his final chapter shows how works by contemporary filmmakers of color respond to institutional histories of exclusion and marginalization, bringing into focus issues like the socially entrapping effects of student indebtedness.

As much as the readings of films are vital to each of the chapters, the engagement with cinema within the pages of *University Babylon* is episodic and eclectic, rather than sustained and integral. To be sure, this study is concerned with much more than *representations* of colleges and college students in setting up several historical episodes and configurations that help bring to light "material connections" between the cinema and the university as institutions (5). For instance, I learned that Will Hays—the white president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), tasked with rehabilitating the industry's public image in the 1920s—had a career in higher education that culminated with his writing "a master's thesis titled 'On the Negro Question,'" a project prompted (according to Hays's own telling) by his interactions with an African American fellow student whom he employed as a servant (13-14). These details from Hays's biography are, as Marez asserts, revealing, considering, on the one

hand, Hays's championing of visual education—the idea of cinema “as a great university” —and, on the other hand, the provision in the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code (whose creation Hays oversaw) banning representations of “miscegenation” in Hollywood films. But the material on Hays appears in the form of a suggestive anecdote, in the book's introduction, not as a point of context applied to the films discussed in the first chapter, which covers the silent era, the period overlapping the first part of Hays's tenure as MPPDA president.

Ultimately, *Hollywood Babylon* is a book—as its subtitle aptly puts—about “film and race politics on campus,” the conjunction linking the two concepts indicating a somewhat amorphous relationship, one constructed quite differently from chapter to chapter. To that effect, the book showcases a grasp of expert film-archival research, but it uses cinema instrumentally, to draw out and reinforce its preselected, university-centered themes, rather than treating film as an object of knowledge in its own right. As in the example cited above, Marez most often locates these themes in the history of cinema by excavating individual biographies. This method works especially well in *University Babylon's* second chapter, which examines the rise of neoliberal politics within the University of California system, from the perspective of the careers of Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Marez analyzes how these notable Hollywood actors' public persona were partly shaped by nostalgic reminiscences of their own college careers and, eventually, in ascending to the governor's office, guided the policies of the state university system. Here Marez's knack for economical and vivid exegesis enables him to tease out a complex web of strong, revealing connections between US cinema as an ideological formation and the intersectional politics of identity on college campuses.

As a counterpoint, Marez's outstanding third chapter examines Tomás Rivera's work as a scholar, artist, professor, and university administrator, focalized through the perspective of Rivera's abiding interests in visual media as educational tool and in the heightened forms of knowledge cultivated by film spectators who engage with dominant images from marginalized positions. Marez deftly juxtaposes Rivera's career, from migrant farmworker to Chancellor of the University of California, Riverside, beginning in 1979—“the first person of color to lead a UC campus” and the first Chicax person to occupy an administrative role in the system—with Hollywood's conservative portrayal of campus life in the era of student protests and the founding of critical ethnic studies programs (120). Marez's account details Rivera's struggles to preserve Riverside's Black Studies Department and Chicano Studies Program, in the face of threats from an entrenched campus culture of white privilege and the school's ties to California's agricultural economy, itself predicated on the exploitation of the labor of people like Rivera and his family.

For all of these highly salient case studies, readers like me, who come to the book from a film studies background, are likely to find themselves wanting a stronger cinema-historical scaffolding and more rigorous usage of the disciplinary keywords that do appear. While offering a superb critique of the major motifs of the earliest “college films”—like their fetishization of football as a settler-colonialist spectacle of violent masculinity—*University Babylon*’s first chapter, for instance, leaves unspecified the difference that periodization makes. Marez might usefully have explored production histories like Hollywood’s dramatic new investment during the 1920s (the final decade of the “silent era,” the chapter’s stated focus) in “youth . . . as both a commodity to be sold and a demographic market to be sold to” (as Cynthia Felando has put it) —“youth” being a crucially racialized, classed, and gendered construct within the studio imagination. Likewise, he might have more precisely defined the “college film genre,” within the silent-era generic landscape, addressing lingering questions: What semiotic and syntactical structures characterize this cycle of films (such that they constitute a genre), and how does it, in turn, differ from and/or overlap with other existing film genres, whose own character stereotypes and social hierarchies are very much in evidence in the movies discussed?

At the outset, Marez states his aim to treat his two primary concerns reciprocally, each one illuminating the other in equal measure. He writes, “*University Babylon* excavates both cinematic archives that shed critical light on U. S. universities and university archives that illuminate the workings of Hollywood” (4). While this is a bold, perhaps ultimately unattainable goal, *University Babylon*, nevertheless, leaves the reader tantalized by the promise entailed in that second clause. What impact, one is left to wonder, might the US film industry’s interests and investments in universities (and their claims to cultural prestige) have had on its own particular institutional histories of race and intersectional oppression?

Marez coins the phrase “university-cinema-industrial complex (UCIC),” to capture the “links between the two institutions” that have developed from the 1910s to the 2010s (5). While the term “complex” may imply something more singular and comprehensive than Marez intends, it offers an umbrella for the many forms of institutional collaboration—and sometimes resistance—that historically characterizes the relationship between the two institutions. It is *University Babylon*’s great contribution to highlight the *range* of forms this relationship has taken. With a roughly 100-year historical scope and wide-ranging constellation of critical motifs to investigate, there is, of course, no way that *University Babylon* could aim at anything like a comprehensive account of its stated topic; some selectivity and eclecticism is desirable here, for the sake of depth. But it will send the reader off in pursuit of the many other stories to which it alludes: the intertwined histories of “home talent” movies (many shot on college campuses) and silent-era race

cinema, the emergence of the “L. A. Rebellion” group of Black filmmakers from UCLA’s MFA program in the 1970s, and so on. Finally, Marez’s study, I hope, will contribute to the ongoing examination of the history of academic film studies, considering both the shaping force of institutional racism on it and the counterinfluence exerted on the field by critical ethnic studies.