

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Brunel University London		
Unit of Assessment: 33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Working Class Participation in the Acting Industry		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006 - 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Michael Wayne	Professor - Media	04/1996 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 - 2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Prof. Wayne has brought research-led insights into the public domain around the causes and consequences of class stratification in the cultural industries, with a particular focus on barriers for working class origin actors.

He has done this using a creative practice methodology as a co-director of a feature length documentary called *The Acting Class* (2017). A lobbying campaign with Third Sector organisations and collaboration with the actor's union Equity accompanied approximately 40 plus public screenings of the film (UK and international), post-screening discussions and DVD sales. Prof. Wayne's work has raised awareness of class inequality within the cultural sector and the broader public.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

The Acting Class demonstrates the interaction of multiple and cumulative barriers for working class origin actors including: financial inequalities, the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital, the London-centric nature of the business, the precarious nature of the work, the wider political context in which a homogenisation of talent entering the industry takes place and the possible impact on representation and storytelling (Ref. 1). Importantly, this is done in the words and through the experiences of those most affected, something that is often buried in more conventional scholarly (written) work. The impact case study's focus on questions of socio-economic barriers to inclusive participation within the public sphere is part of Prof. Wayne's broader and ongoing research into the cultural-political implications of social stratification.

The immediate origins of *The Acting Class* lay in Prof. Wayne's previous documentary feature film, *The Condition of the Working Class* (2012). Inspired by Engels' ground-breaking book of 1844, *The Condition of the Working Class* project involved working with Manchester and Salford residents for 3 months to produce and perform a play based on Engels' text and the performers' own self-identified working class experiences. The process of making the play (not the finished product) was the subject of the film *The Condition of the Working Class*. The focus on the process allowed exploration of the relationship between classed experiences, memories, history and representation. In an example of praxis, the research was itself the subject of a critical reflection on this mode of creative practice-based research (Ref. 2).

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Representations of the British working class in the media has been a recurrent theme in Prof. Wayne's work. He (then, Reader) has explored how the political economy of the British film industry may shape the kind of stories the industry produces (Ref. 3) and has critically interrogated how the cultural industry promotes itself as a means of social mobility in British films where the working class sing, dance and generally perform their way out of their precarious social circumstances (Ref. 4). The trend continues with the recent film *Wild Rose* (2019).

Prof. Wayne has also investigated how class shapes the reception of television news discourses, drawing on his own empirical focus group research data (Ref. 5). More broadly, Prof. Wayne's work has made a critical intervention into scholarly debates across cultural theory to demonstrate that class stratification remains powerfully efficacious in the world. This underlines the importance of continuing to use and refine class concepts to understand how barriers to participation work and what their consequences are. It also has implications for policy makers who, until recently, have been reluctant to acknowledge class as a structuring feature of social life. As co-editor of the interdisciplinary anthology *Considering Class, Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*, Prof. Wayne brought together an international range of scholars from political economy, political sciences, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, media studies and film studies to explore class. He also contributed a co-authored essay to the volume on the role of intellectuals in reinforcing and/or challenging class distinctions (Ref. 6).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Ref 1. *The Acting Class* (Dir: Michael Wayne & Deirdre O'Neill), 2017. The film and the webpage with accompanying materials (reviews, screenings, campaign) can be viewed here: www.theactingclass.info

Ref 2. 'The Condition of the Working Class' in *Working USA: The Journal of Labour and Society*, Vol.16, 2013, pp. 487-503. Co-Authored with Deirdre O'Neill. <https://doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12076>

Ref 3. 'Working Title Mark II: A Critique of the Atlanticist Orientation of British Cinema' in *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, Vol. 2 (1), 2006, pp. 59-73. <https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.2.1.59/1>

Ref 4. 'The Performing Northern Working Class in British Cinema: Cultural Representation and its Political Economy' in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 23 (4), 2006, pp. 287-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200690897572>

Ref 5. 'Classed Audiences in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism' in *The Sage Handbook of Television Studies* (eds) Manuel Alvarado, Milly Buonanno, Herman Gray and Toby Miller, Sage, 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473910423.n29>

Ref 6. 'On Intellectuals' in *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and Media in the 21st Century*, (eds) Deirdre O'Neill and Mike Wayne, Brill, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004319523>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Inequality in the creative industries is a prevalent issue, which only recently has begun to receive traction. As of 2018, 'only 18% of creative industries employees come from the working class, whereas 70% come from upper middle-class and privileged backgrounds' (E8). '67% of Oscar winners have been privately educated...[and] there is a pay gap of around £10,000 pa between those from senior professional backgrounds and those from the working class' (E8).

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Prof. Wayne's film *The Acting Class* actively goes against this and has raised public awareness and debates on class inequality and mobilised the union Equity and charity Leigh Film Society to promote issues on young people from working class backgrounds in the film industry.

The film has had a significant impact for Equity, its members and its policy making. Equity is a union of over 4,700 performers and creative practitioners working throughout the entertainment industry. Prof. Wayne worked with Equity head office to screen the film to local branches with a view to putting the question of socio-economic disadvantage onto the agenda of Equity's national conference in May 2018. The President of Equity confirms that 'The film is a powerful documentary of the problems faced by our members who are from lower income backgrounds, and the problems faced by the industry to be truly representative' (E2).

The film screened at Equity branches in Brighton, Liverpool, Newcastle, Oxford and Sheffield and Equity paid for venue hire and the directors' travel expenses. The film's directors spoke at Equity's May 2018 annual conference on the issue of class stratification in the industry and the film was cited by Brighton and Sussex Branch Motion 24 (passed) that urged Equity to campaign 'to abolish tuition fees for top professional training courses.' The film has played a key role within Equity in helping push the question of class up the union's agenda and in the 2019 establishment of a new 'Class network' within the union, which campaigns 'on the issue of class inequality and work with other organisations such as Arts Emergency and policy makers in Parliament' (E2). The film is cited in Equity's arts policy document 2019 'Performance for All' (E8, p.17).

The impact of the film for individual actors was that it helped socialise experiences often perceived and/or felt to be their own individual problem or fault. The film provided a forum for collective discussion on a social problem in Leigh Town, Borough of Wigan, where 6 communities rank within the top 10% most deprived in the country (E3). The film has had significant impact on Leigh Film Society, 'a Charity not for profit film organisation run entirely by volunteers [who] use film screenings to fight against social isolation, create opportunities for young people and support community cohesion' (E3). The Development Director of Leigh Film Society writes that inequality in the arts is felt deeply in Leigh Town and 'Young Filmmakers and Actors have been forced to re locate to London to get any sort of recognition' (E3).

Leigh Film Society confirms that 'the film has provided [them] with a compelling and effective tool to keep the conversation going on inequality in the film industry' (E3). They have used *The Acting Class* to boost their work with parliament and 'have sent the DVD to [their] member of parliament...MP who works hard to keep social mobility in the media focus and when issues around this are raised in Parliament' (E3).

Even before *The Acting Class* was finished the film was having an impact in terms of starting conversations and debates on social media thanks to both the Twitter handle 'actingclassdoc' (1,767 followers) and a crowdfunding campaign for the film on Indigogo. The directors raised over GBP2,000 from 65 backers and more than 7,400 people visited the fundraising site during the campaign. The film's website continues to attract significant traffic. Between June 2018 and June 2019, it had over 3,200 views (E1). The film premiered in September 2017 at the TUC's Congress House where more than 100 people turned up and participated in the Q&A afterwards. Its last major public screening was at the Crystal Palace International Film Festival in March 2019. The film was sometimes shown for free (as at the Premiere) and sometimes for a fee. In the latter case it contributed to local economies, taking box office revenues of several hundred pounds each at venues such as the Rio (Dalston), Home Cinema (Manchester), Salford Arts

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Theatre, the Bob Hope Theatre (Eltham), the Lexi (London), the Broadway (Nottingham) and the Everyman (Crystal Palace). All in all, it has been screened publicly on more than 40 occasions (including internationally) followed by Q&As.

Following a screening at the Northern Stage in Newcastle, local theatre company, Blowin' A Hooley tweeted 'Brilliant night @northernstage to discuss @actingclassdoc. Let's work together & keep shouting to change the landscape for #workingclass #actors and #artists in a hugely elitist industry.'

The film won best UK Feature at the Labour Film Festival 2017, helping to promote awareness of the cultural industries as a site of inequality and discrimination within the trade union movement. It was also a critical success with reviewers:

- 'This is a groundbreaking and passionately argued documentary' (*Morning Star*),
- 'a searing account of the rock-solid class ceiling in the acting industry' (*Counterfire*), (E1).

An audience survey conducted by the Cinecity Film Festival in Brighton where the film was shown indicated that for a broader public the film was educational and informative and the screening and Q&A valued for raising audience awareness about a hidden problem. Typical comments included 'Insightful and in-depth experience' and 'It tells me something I didn't know'. (Feedback available on request). The film helped raise awareness about an issue which the culture industry's self-promotion of itself as a meritocratic promoter of talent often obscures. The presence of well-known British acting talent in the film such as Christopher Eccleston, Maxine Peake, Julie Hesmondhalgh and Samuel West increased the film's circulation and credibility for audiences and the media. For example, Julie Hesmondhalgh mentioned the film on Radio 4's *Thinking Aloud* (December 2017) and the directors were interviewed on BBC Radio Leicester about the film prior to a screening there.

Cultural industry policy debates on inequality often marginalise class barriers. The film helped focus attention on the issue for policy analysts and audiences. It was screened to a full-house at the Leicester Phoenix as part of the BFI's launch of its report 'Workforce Diversity in the UK Screen Sector', and it was also screened at the BFI Southbank as part of the BFI's 'Working Class Heroes' weekend event (E4). The co-author of the report confirms that 'the impact of the film...was the centre-piece of the event [and] it enhanced public understanding of how policy or a lack of proactive policy affects institutions, careers, participation, and the kinds of cultural sector we have and the products it produces' (E4). They further confirm that 'the film is now a regular fixture on the undergraduate and postgraduate Cultural, Media and Visual Studies programmes at Nottingham University' where they now work and it has 'been incredibly useful as a pedagogic tool' (E4).

The film joined forces with The Equality Trust and Just Fair who contacted the directors following their article on broader class inequalities in *Open Democracy* (E5). The NGOs are campaigning to bring the Socio-Economic Duty lying dormant in the 2010 Equality Act into effect. Together, Prof. Wayne and the NGOs devised a postcard campaign, handed out at screenings, inviting audience members to write to their MPs. This raised awareness amongst the general public and Parliament. The majority of the 83 MPs who signed Early Day Motion 591 did so during the joint campaign (E1 and E6).

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The film deploys a narrative strand focusing on one actor in particular, Tom Stocks. His organisation Actor Awareness has tried to provide practical resources and opportunities for struggling actors. Tom is one of the beneficiaries of the film which has helped raise his own profile and that of his organisation within the sector and broader public as well as deepen his understanding of the issues (E7).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

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- E1** The film's webpage at: www.theactingclass.info
- E2** Letter from Equity President, 17 October 2019
- E3** Letter from Leigh Film Society, 10 October 2019
- E4** Letter from Nottingham University, 16 October 2019
- E5** Putting class back onto the UK's equality agenda, Open Democracy UK, 14 January 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/putting-class-back-onto-uks-equality-agenda/>
- E6** Letter from Just Fair Policy Director, 11 October 2019
- E7** Letter from Actor Awareness
- E8** Equity Arts Policy 2019, *Performance For All*, https://www.equity.org.uk/media/3370/equity_arts-policy-2019_final-web.pdf