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# Starving the Beast. The Battle to Disrupt and Reform America's Public Universities': SXSW Review

1:22 PM PDT 3/21/2016 by John DeFore



Courtesy of SXSW

#### THE BOTTOM LINE

*A detailed policy doc about an important trend.* 

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Should higher education be "disrupted"?

Who gains when public universities start to think of themselves more like businesses and treat students like customers? Are America's public research universities, long a magnet for brilliant students around the world, in need of reinvention by conservative businessmen? What is education for, anyway? These are just a few of the questions raised in *Starving the Beast*, Steve Mims' look at trends in higher education that are often poorly understood by a public whose attention is focused on skyrocketing tuition and student debt. Sometimes dry but cogent and much needed, the documentary should earn respect at festivals but will play best on the small screen.

Opening with a fiery LSU commencement address by James Carville, who decries the commoditization of education, the doc soon traces that trend back to a couple of sources. Clayton Christensen's *The Innovator's Dilemma*, which urged disruption, was embraced "like gospel" in Silicon Valley and soon applied in many fields where, according to Mims' interviewees, its lessons made no sense. That paved the way for Jeff Sandefer, a former University of Texas business professor whose "Seven Breakthrough Solutions" proposals addressed education specifically, emphasizing things like evaluating teachers through student feedback.

Sandefer's ideas were embraced by Texas governor Rick Perry, making U.T. and Texas A&M good places for Mims to observe some nasty politicking – impeachment of regents, pressure on deans. But he does venture beyond Texas' borders, looking at the crisis faced by president Teresa Sullivan at the University of Virginia, and at huge cuts at LSU, where the state's budget shortfall caused uncertainty that the university's doors would open in the fall.

These stories are all so interwoven with statehouse politics that Mims finds himself discussing everything from Wisconsin governor Scott Walker's war on collective bargaining to the vast influence of Art Pope, a businessman described here as North Carolina's version of the Koch Brothers.

Though never hard to follow, the discussion can sometimes challenge an unwonky viewer's attention span. But it contains big insights for those who wade in – and helps lay the groundwork for debates over whether our universities should be designed to broadly increase society's capacity for reason and insight, or should have their productivity monitored moment-by-moment by people who believe, as Sandefer does, that "everything can be measured in dollars."

*Venue: South by Southwest Film Festival (Documentary Spotlight)*

*Production company: Railyard Films*

*Director-screenwriter-director of photography-Editor: Steve Mims*

*Producer: Bill Banowsky*

*Composer: Graham Reynolds*

*Not rated, 95 minutes*

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# 'Slash': SXSW Review

1:21 PM PDT 3/21/2016 by John DeFore



Courtesy of SXSW

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THE BOTTOM LINE

*Not nearly as exciting as the tales its heroes supposedly write.* 

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Two teens enter the "adult" world of writing pornographic fan-fiction.

"The Bronte sisters wrote fanfic," claim the teen heroes of Clay Liford's *Slash*, a coming-of-age pic set in the subculture of those who write unauthorized erotic stories about their favorite fictional characters. Well, that may be – but Emily and Charlotte probably brought more wit to their tales than do the authors here, whose klutzy fantasies are sometimes enacted film-within-a-film style. Writer-director Liford fares little better, missing most opportunities for humor and arousal in this sincere but flat picture. Real world fanfic enthusiasts may appreciate the attention, but most could probably hatch a more involving tale in the time it takes to scratch "Kirk + Spock 4 Evr" into a wooden bench.

Michael Johnston stars as Neil, an introvert who spends his after-school hours alone, inventing bawdy adventures for Vanguard, the hero of a series of sci-fi novels he likes. He has no idea his more socially adept classmate Julia (Hannah Marks) shares his hobby until he discovers The Rabbit Hole, an online forum for porny stories about what, say, Batman and Robin might get up to in the Batcave between showdowns with the Joker.

"You're so repressed, your stuff must be good," Julia tells Neil, and while her logic is questionable, she and the movie do decide his stories are works of brilliant eroticism. So much so that Neil is soon competing with Julia to read his work at a private ComicCon gathering organized by an editor (Michael Ian Black) who (not knowing Neil's underage) hopes to engage in some IRL shenanigans.

Marks is lively here as an intimidatingly worldly upperclassman with an elf-loving side, but Johnston's wet-blanket performance barely hints at the spark of fantasy the pic wants to fan into a self-fulfilled flame. Questions about the boy's sexuality don't intrigue as much as they should: Though his stories suggest a pansexual curiosity, Neil himself seems only mildly engaged, and sluggish direction keeps both scenes with the nerd's dream girl and the jailbait-courting man from generating much heat.

*Venue: South by Southwest Film Festival (Narrative Spotlight)*

*Production companies: Arts + Labor, Boxcar Films*

*Cast: Michael Johnston, Hannah Marks, Michael Ian Black, Missi Pyle, Jessie Ennis, Peter Vack, Sarah Ramos*

*Director-screenwriter: Clay Liford*

*Producers: Brock Williams, Jason Wehling*

*Executive producers: Randy Sinquefield, Jesse Lyda, Louis Black*

*Director of photography: Ellie Ann Fenton*

*Production designer: Chelsea Turner*

*Costume designers: Nichole Hull, Anell Brodeur*

*Editors: Bryan Poyser, David Fabelo*

*Composers: Curtis Heath, Lauren Sanders*

*Casting director: J.C. Cantu*

*Sales: Nate Bolotin, XYZ Films*

*Not rated, 100 minutes*

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