

FILM SCHOOLS IN A POST-INDUSTRIAL ERA

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At VCA, we are tragically committed to the primacy of the director.

Billy Wilder has this to say about it:

A director must be a policeman, a midwife,
 a psychoanalyst, a sycophant, and a bastard.
 (Walker and Johnson 2008)

And at VCA, we make sure every graduate has just these skills.
 And we're not alone. Many of the best international schools are just as adept. Every two years, the world association of national film schools called CILECT, has a competition for the world's best short film. CILECT around 120 member schools in 50 countries.

Here are some contenders from this year's set of 20 DVD's on my desk.

1. Title of Film in English: Benigni
 School: Turku University of Applied Sciences/ Turku Arts Academy Film Department
 Country: Finland
 Film Duration: 7.49 min.
 Synopsis: A lonesome xylophone player finds a viciously growing tumor under his arm. In his attempts to get rid of the tumor he discovers that it has some unconventional qualities.
 (CILECT 2010)

2. Title of Film in English: Night inside
 School: Universidad del Cine
 Country: Argentina
 Film Duration: 18 min.
 Synopsis: The newlyweds have already left the party where the guests are still dancing. The bride has bled to death and the groom carries the body. He drags her down the stairs and along a long corridor until they fall down. At the shore, the groom gives her away to the river, floating in a boat.
 (CILECT 2010)

3. Title of Film in English: Conflict
 School: ESAV
 Country: France
 Film Duration: 12.16 min.
 Synopsis: Bernard is a 50 years old worker; he spends a meaningless and repetitive life. His loneliness gets him totally crazy. He finally commits something very tragical.
 (CILECT 2010)

4. Title of Film in English: *The Opposite Shore*
 School: Beijing Film Academy
 Country: China P.R.
 Film Duration: 29 min.
 Synopsis: This is a story between the young guys and a middle-aged man. They held a hostile attitude to each other because of a misunderstanding and tended to solve problems in man's way. But at last, they all changed their minds after experiencing something that really touched them, and became good friends. But unfortunately, they couldn't meet each other any more.
- (CILECT 2010)

Finally, my favourite for poignancy:

5. Title of Film in English: *Old Man and the Moose*
 School: Baltic Film and Media School
 Country: Estonia
 Film Duration: 27 min.
 Synopsis: Harry has been studying moose and their inner natures for more than 30 years. For Harri, moving around with the moose on the wetland, where conversing with them in the "moose language" has become a ritual of sorts.
- (CILECT 2010)

What I'd like to discuss today, is how the emphasis we place on these skills in film education has changed since the early days of practical film education – a time when an Industrial model of film production existed – much like the United States car manufacturing industry, or Australia's motor mower industry– both of course are now in mortal decline or have disappeared entirely.

Then I'm going to run through three observations that I think are necessary for a contemporary screen content school to succeed. By implication, I think we might apply these to making a successful post-industrial filmmaker.

And just to be clear about my terms, I'm judging success here as someone who shapes national idea agendas through screen content, and, gets paid at least as much as a plumber's assistant for doing it.

Australia has many film training institutions. Three that cost a large deal of money, Griffith AFTRS and VCA; and around 19 or 20 Universities offering media majors not to mention countless TAFES and other providers. Let's say between 18,000 – 25,000 students enrolled at any one time depending on how you count them.

And why? They can't all get jobs in the industry – or rather – industries.

The industrial model of film production said: only specially trained professionals using expensive professional equipment will be given access to carefully controlled means of distribution.

But many filmmakers, including myself, have misunderstood the rise of digital equipment and on-line distribution, as a democratising force in mass communication.

The windows of commercial distribution though, have remained as tightly shut as they ever were, whilst on-line services remain primarily promotional rather than commercially productive for their content makers.

I've now bought over 11 million dollars of high definition equipment just to keep two film schools internationally competitive. Despite the claims that Red cameras work as well as Panavision 35mm's for a tenth of the price, and I have apparently bought three of these devices now under strict instructions from my bosses – that is my students – they will now not settle for anything less than the later Red model with MX sensor chip upgrade. And there's a waiting list!

Anyone can make a credit-card feature on gear you can buy from an Apple shop. But don't kid yourself. To even think about putting a shoestring feature on commercial screens will cost a minimum of \$700,000 for remedial fix ups. Less for TV, but it's still hard to produce internationally saleable broadcastable material for less than \$200,000 per hour.

Now of course people say it's the idea that matters, not the cost. And that seems to be true for Cannes – we've had 16 students and graduates in competition compete there over the last 15 years. "My Rabbit Hoppy" from their 2008 Official Shorts competition, costs only around \$1,000 to make, and featured the director's little brother and pet rabbit in his country back yard.

This year's award winner "Deeper Than Yesterday", was a little more expensive. Shot in a former Soviet submarine moored in Westernport, twenty actors played trapped Russian submariners, all speaking Russian. I knew director Ari Kleiman was going to be a successful when he not only pulled off the shoot, but sold the Portapotti I had insisted he buy for cast and crew hygiene, after the shoot on E-Bay for a profit.

I'm going to note here, as I have at our ASPERA conferences, a certain dread when I am told that one of our films has been selected for a prestigious competition. Because each short selected by Cannes, costs the director and school, friends, family, and government agencies around \$50,000 in blowups, thousands of electronic press kits, and travel and accommodation for accredited crewmembers. For "Deeper Than Yesterday", our cast buy-out for legal reasons will cost a further minimum of \$20,000 before any commercial sales go ahead – with minimal chance of recoupment.

And of course, despite these festival wins, our feature market still hovers at a pathetic Australian home-grown box office of around 3%, and Australian drama on TV is embarrassingly under-represented. So clearly, our film schools, and VCA especially, could be doing a whole lot better. So what are the things we have to keep, and what do we have to change?

The first constant is that passionate self-expression is still the principal driver of enrolments. Passion produces great art, and great filmmakers.

This is the egocentric driver. But now we're drowning in passionate egos if we consider the endless cacophony of voices.

So let me go back to first educational principles.

Jung says, man's aim in life is the achievement of psychic harmony between cultivation of the self and devotion to the outer world.

This is why being a filmmaker is so confusing and thoroughly narcissistic. A magnet for the severely creative, whose life balance we attempt to restore not by modification of the extreme self to any great extent, but by making the uncaring world briefly understand them for a few minutes through film.

That's why I think of film schools as special care facilities for the severely creative. Churches for the agnostic – where typical rites of self-flagellation and purifying are done at first privately, and then ever more publicly until the little ones can stand the full glare of the sun.

But of course we lose some to the darkest of dark sides – Los Angeles –where our own little Robert Luketic had shown so much promise after his short *Titsiana Booberini*, led him on to make *Legally Blondes 1 and 2* and others.

The visible seeds of his future Hollywood success were already sown at film school, when his lead actor accused him of ripping off her script.

The main drama of any film school does not happen on screen. It happens amongst people learning to negotiate solutions to intractable problems with competing people they cannot afford to dismiss.

It happens when participants, both students and teachers, must face the gap between their hopes– their scripts – and their deeds - the reality of their production in the cold evidence of the rushes. The first, most important lesson is to teach the self, how not to be self-deluded. In addition, you can't teach that easily. But you can set up self-delusion traps through elaborate structures like “hey why don't we all make a film together?” that invariably lead the self to at least a foggy mirror reflection of itself. Transcendence for sceptics is how I think of it.

So my first observation about post-industrial schools is that in order to succeed they need to take students on a journey from egocentricity to empathy. We try and get them to play nicely with others.

This is not simple though, and as each student makes their early works about breaking free from their parents, one thing becomes clear. No one likes to share their toys.

But in a world where everyone has the means of production, the only people who matter are the people who really understand you. So what we are trying to do is make our students less self-centred and more compassionate, in a society that for most learners in their own living memories, has always been about supporting only their own needs, and less about considering the needs of others.

And we are doing this in a non-religious way, although the traditional film school has always been much closer to a religious order structurally than to an educational one.

My second observation is that research demonstrates that contemporary multi-platform audiences are not as promiscuous as we may have believed. They go back to trusted sources, especially when stressed. So it may be that now, credibility is more important than incredibility. If you're going to put a proposition that works, it has to be dependable. And this observation sees us shifting from an entertainment-focussed paradigm to a communication centred paradigm

It means the post-industrial filmmaker has to be as fluent with the non-film disciplines that fascinate him, as his own craft and art skills. It means the post-industrial filmmaker not only has to understand a journalist's ability to make sense from chaotic information quickly and reliably, but it also means the filmmaker has to go beyond the simple who-what-where of journalism, and ask the big editorial questions of 'why', and have the intellectual muscle to be able to defend and prosecute their case.

This is why I'm saying credibility counts, and that without it, no amount of money or content matters – because audiences have massive choices and short attention spans.

This sense-making role is a professionalised way of linking seeing, feeling, and thought.

I'm proposing we shift the gaze of film schools from training entertainment professionals, to educating professional communicators, and I'm also on about finding a strong sense of place in the work. Because film might be global in application, but good content is often parochial, in the best sense of the word.

Encore magazine this month is running a story by Danielle Lauren, an Australian filmmaker and student who has interned on the US TV series *Madmen* for the last six weeks in Hollywood:

“Returning back to Australia was bittersweet. Los Angeles offers creative opportunities, endless amounts of projects to work on and pitch your ideas, but the culture and hierarchy within the system uninviting. The ruthless competitiveness is felt everyday, whether that be by witnessing lines of people turning up for auditions or staff jeopardising one another for hopes of self-advancement. The cutthroat nature is a turn-off and made me hesitant about pursuing a career in Los Angeles. It's not that I can't handle the aggression; I just don't want my work environment to feel like a war zone.”

(Encore, 2010)

So, film school are very rooted to their locations and the culture of their place. Melbourne crews for example are often described as cooperative – and this may have something to do with the VCA/Swinburne influence of an essentially cooperative production culture.

Sydney crews are often described as more LA in temperament. WA crews and Adelaide crews show an enviable sense of cooperation.

Despite the global nature of the cinema industry, film schools then, are often extraordinarily parochial places – or at least – tend like the best wines, to develop a sense of what the French call 'terroir' – those readily identifiable flavours that identify the authenticity of the product or expression.

Particularly after a long period of time and VCA has been going for around 45 years now, it is possible to chart the hopes and fears of a number of generations of filmmakers reasonably accurately through their films, and gain a sense of terroir. Unlike larger scale commercial productions – moderated by investors and the market – the short filmmakers of film schools are producing in some ways a remarkable and permanent set of primary historical artefacts that illustrate very personal responses to the issues of self-discovery of the day.

So what are the key characteristics that will evolve from student films within a new and convergent digital media world, and can they be easily predicted within such a turbulent time?

In a word – and equally frustratingly for educators and students – no.

And I mean ‘no’, in the same way a research supervisor might guide a Masters or PhD candidate away from the almost irresistible temptation of developing a ‘theory of everything’ that forces all known or imagined experienced in to a neat and predictable conceptual construct. These ‘theories of everything’ tend to become theological, rather than rational pursuits – and fundamentalism of this sort in education, is as dangerous to critical reflection as fundamentalism to any walk of life.

Rather, the types of film and graduates we see in post-industrial schools, are still as messy as they’ve always been, but with changing inflections based on lives lived rather than latest fads.

Students bring their own values to film. As more and more adults enter higher education – including industry professionals upgrading and reflecting on their work – they bring valuable histories that actually become part of their curriculum. Nothing we do takes place in a vacuum, and our students and audience cannot be treated as *tabula rasa*, blank slates for teachers to fill in. For educators this idea is sometimes described as pedagogy’s older sibling androgogy – coined for adult learning, and especially useful for filmmakers who integrate feeling with thought.

My third and last observation is that we need new forms of quality control, to strip out curriculum materials and experiences that crowd student experience without directly enriching it.

We need to leave gaps for students fill in themselves, and eliminate distractions so that they do this constructively.

We need to help students find those gaps, by making parts of our curriculum, 100% face-to-face time experiences, without phones and simultaneous emails. This is to help students and staff develop authentic voices. As an example, we know that art galleries are often bestowed with works that though highly prized by the giver, and not highly prized by the receiver. The process of throwing out this stuff is called de-accessioning. Whenever someone has a great idea for improving our curriculum, we have to ask what are we going to throw out to make room.

So let me sum up my three observations that might characterise a post-industrial film school – and by implication – a post-industrial filmmaker;

First, we steer makers from egocentricity – a necessary condition by the way – to empathy with others.

Second, we value credibility rather than flashiness, and we teach this by broadening our conception of entertainer, to key communicator. We help our students ask why, in cogent ways.

Third, we ruthlessly cull our curriculum to preserve thinking space for our filmmakers – to value the thinking histories that come with each learner.

And of course, failing all that, we simply send the rushes of our worst productions to Australia's Funniest Home Videos. We have had some nasty accidents on set that I know their audiences would find hysterical.

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