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The Education of a Student Filmmaker



Joseph Bierman

There are various approaches to designing a curriculum for would-be filmmakers. Technical institutes and some colleges train students to operate a camera, read a light meter, and splice film stock. But strictly technical training does not foster creativity in the art of filmmaking—or even mastery of technique. The kind of education we must aspire to provide for student filmmakers emphasizes the close connection between their study of film and of the liberal arts.

Many college film courses that emphasize technology risk having students develop a myopic view of course content. Much of the technical training with equipment and techniques is specific to the particular field, consequently encouraging students to view the course as vocation-oriented only. While many undergraduates may perceive their education as strictly career preparation, the teacher must provide a balance between such training and a broader liberal arts education. If the teacher's goal is to ensure that an Advanced Film production course fits within the general context of a liberal arts education, he or she must first come to some understanding of what "liberal arts" means and how it will affect teaching, course design, and student creativity.

Students do not take a film production course with the intention of developing critical thinking skills; they come for many other reasons. For example, the students may perceive themselves as the next young filmmakers to appear on the cover of *Premiere* magazine. The average film student is very aware of the industry and views a production course as the first step towards working in the industry. However, the student's steady intellectual diet of *Entertainment Tonight* and *American Film* gets in the way of the teacher's attempts to present the material in a less vocational manner. Many students bring to class a wealth of naive questions, including such gems as, "How do I become a Hollywood director?"

The straightforward answer is that one becomes a Hollywood director by spending many years struggling at the margins of the industry. As preparation, most successful Hollywood directors have some sort of college degree, and many times it is in the liberal arts. Having corrected the students' misinformed notions, the teacher can now renew their interest in film through a liberal arts perspective.

The first principle I establish in my Advanced Filmmaking class is the primacy of understanding the technological aspects of film production. Many are the critics and cinema studies writers whose theories have been ambushed by a lack of basic production knowledge. My students' introduction to technology stresses the role machines play in film production. Students learn about a camera, not because they wish to become camera operators, but because it is the basic tool of filmmaking. But this is only the start of a filmmaker's education.

The development of the motion picture camera can also be studied from a historical perspective. Students are introduced to new technologies based upon prior technologies. For example, my students learn that motion picture photography is based upon still photography and that still camera design can be traced back to the ideas of Leonardo Da Vinci. Introducing new equipment or techniques with short history lessons about their development presents students with a

historical perspective that illustrates the transmission of knowledge as an ongoing process.

And presenting knowledge as process leads to a discussion of science and the scientific method. Understanding cinematography requires a detailed knowledge of the basic principles of light and chemistry. The learning process here is similar to the basic methods used by scientists in many fields. For instance, just as students would in a science course, my students design an experiment to determine the limitations of a film stock under certain lighting conditions. They perform the experiment, analyze the data, and then draw conclusions. The students produce a two-page paper detailing the shoot, the data collected, and the conclusions supported by that data. In this instance, the students are adapting the scientific method in service of the art of filmmaking.

The link between science and art is further developed when students are presented with the essay "Some Thoughts on My Profession" by Nestor Almendros, the cinematographer of many well known films, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Sophie's Choice*, and *Billy Bathgate*. In the essay, Almendros presents a strong case for the tie between technical and artistic development. Just as the development of packaging paint in tubes allowed Impressionist painters greater mobility (they could take their paints into the field and were no longer tied to the studio), new developments in film technology offer filmmakers greater and more creative choices.

Almendros also worked on many of the films of the late French director François Truffaut. The students are shown *The Wild Child*, a film based on an eighteenth-century doctor's diary account of attempts to work with a child found living wild in rural France. Truffaut wished to present an accurate image of the world two hundred years ago; to duplicate the lighting of that time, the filmmakers limited their on-screen lighting sources to sunlight or candles. The minimal available light for the shoot presented a challenge, which Almendros solved by experimenting with available film stocks. After the screening, I ask my students to draw on their own

film stock experiments and the Almendros essay to discuss how the tools of production influenced *The Wild Child*.

Discussions of this type form the basis of writing assignments. Although Advanced Filmmaking is a production course, I strongly emphasize student writing. As a final project, students produce a short film and are asked to write a paper analyzing the production. This paper and the film are given equal weight in the final grade. The students learn that the ability to write about their film experience is equal to the filmmaking experience itself.

In stressing the connection between filmmaking and the liberal arts, the instructor has other important choices to make. For example, the selection of the textbook can set the tone for the class. For Advanced Filmmaking, Tom McDonough's *Light Years: Confessions of a Cinematographer*, a collection of short essays, is my book of choice. The jacket blurb says, "*Light Years* is 'about' cinematography the way *The Old Man and the Sea* is 'about' fishing." One essay in the collection concerns the personality traits of camera operators. Another essay is a piece of travel writing about the challenge of documentary production in India. There is a humorous piece on taking a union camera test. These essays include references to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Winslow Homer, and the Zapruder film. McDonough expects his readers to be familiar with *Moby Dick*, the Industrial Revolution, and John McCornack's rendition of "Danny Boy." The author presents filmmaking as an activity related to the larger world. This relationship is the subject of both McDonough's book and Advanced Filmmaking.

Film is a twentieth-century art made possible by developments in science and machinery. Of course, any understanding of film must begin with the study of technology; however, technology does not develop in a vacuum, nor should it be taught in one. Advanced Filmmaking at Rowan College stresses the tools of production while encouraging students to explore film's connection with the larger world of history, science, and art. By providing this broad perspective, Ad-

vanced Filmmaking fits well within the context of a liberal arts education.