

Teaching and Creation

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Contents :

1. "Gai savoir" constantly to be reinvented.	p.3
2. What connections between teaching screenwriting and teaching film direction?	p.4
3. A film is always made within the context of production	p.5
4. It's possible to write a script for a blockbuster. Finding the means to direct it is another matter	p.6
5. A self-produced film with no budget also has its own limitations.	p.7
6. What are the skills required to teach scriptwriting and film direction?	p.7
7. What role can teaching screenplay writing and film direction play in film studies curriculum?	p.8
8. Footnotes	p.10
9. Bibliography	p.11

Summary:

What goals for what teaching?

When the question of teaching screenwriting and film direction is brought up, a host of questions arise:

Are we talking about teaching filmmaking in public and private film schools, in primary, middle or high schools, in multidisciplinary universities... or in continuing education seminars and workshops? Can we imagine teaching screenwriting solely through manuals? (Major books on screenwriting claim to provide rules on dramaturgy, to be applied indiscriminately.)

Do we instead need to coordinate the development of action and reflection around film, through practice?

If so, how would that work in concrete terms? Can one teach screenwriting, without addressing questions about staging and direction and without examining dramatic structure? Or, on the contrary, can we think synergistically about the script and its direction? Should a foundation screenwriting and film direction course be set up, or should students study films already written and made? Should the approach to teaching (what can and should be taught) be changed to a greater or lesser degree? Is there a difference between film theory and film analysis? Are these linked to creation?

I. «Gai savoir [1]» constantly to be reinvented.

We disagree with the notion that creation that can be learned as a technique. In the United States there is a profusion of writing workshops for writers, as if being a novelist were dependent upon learning recipes and knowing formulas. In this article, another point of view is put forth. Any techniques and rules that may exist, are simply tools to support creation. Every work can be unique in its own way, and can escape predefined rules. Many filmmakers say that one can't learn film direction through classes, but only by shooting and making mistakes.

Andrei Konchalovsky, questioned by Michel Ciment, states,

"I do not think one can learn the art through a theoretical approach. That's a bit like using an operating manual to pilot an airplane: You can know by heart what to do, what button you need to push in order to fly, but when you are in a real situation, with your hands on the controls, it doesn't work, because you need an enormous amount of practice with the machine, for it to work. And to practice, essentially means to fail, to have made a lot of mistakes. And I can tell you that I've made some mistakes! Even today, with thirty years of practice, I don't think I can avoid every mistake." (De Baecque and al. 2007, p. 83)

Stephen Frears, questioned by Jean-Pierre Lavoignat, states:

"In England, I sometimes teach film making. But what kind of teacher am I? A bit unusual, because the first thing that comes to my mind, is that one can't teach how to make movies. (...) We learn to make movies solely by making them. (...) It's only when students make a film and start to make mistakes, that one can start working. Everything that I know, I learned by making a fool of myself, in other words, by making movies." (De Baecque and al. 2007, p. 179 -180)

There is not necessarily any theory to distill from filmmaking practice. A screenwriter has to write screenplays, above all. A film director has to shoot movies. One learns through creating, often by trial and error. In this case, the teacher becomes a kind of a psychoanalyst, making it possible for the learner to flourish, Stephen Frears notes. The teacher accompanies the student films, without becoming the author and without imposing his or her own rules. Each director has his or her own codes.

Other filmmakers, including some of the most renowned, are happy to take the on the role of theorist, in regards to their own work. In *Les Théories des cineastes* (2002), Jacques Aumont puts into perspective the texts of Robert Bresson, René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein, Raine Werner Fassbinder, Jean-Luc Godard, Jerry Lewis, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Nicholas Ray, Eric Rohmer and Andrei Tarkovsky. All put forth concepts and formulate thoughts about film, directly linked to their own practices (as well as, in some cases, those of the filmmakers they themselves admire). As exciting as these reflections are, a drawback is that indicate only one way of making movies.

Is knowledge transfer meant to elucidate the work of a particular filmmaker, or to allow aspiring filmmakers to find their own way?

2. What connections between teaching screenwriting and teaching film direction?

When film schools have separate screenwriting and film direction departments, how do these two lines work together and what sort of courses do they have in common? Are meetings between film direction students and screenwriting students encouraged? Can one know, when starting out, if destined to just write screenplays or just direct films, or to do both at once?

Most private film schools approach direction as a practical operation, as the mastery of technique to acquire. This is totally nonsense, in terms of creation. This is why filmmaker Wim Wenders said,

“There are many young people who, after five years in school, approach feature films with the mindset of a salesperson. And I think we see the consequences of this in movies today. It seems to me, that we see more and more movies that don’t tell any story, but that claim to do so, by selling something that seems like a story. Those directors have nothing to say. They are advertising.” (De Baecque and al. 2007, p.41)

Most screenplay writing classes do not deal with questions about direction, as if the transition from script to direction were only a matter of formality. This is a misunderstanding of what makes a film successful, artistically. Milos Forman began to teach at the prestigious Columbia University in New York City after having become famous as a filmmaker. He said :

“Screenwriting and film direction are inseparable. This is what I want to emphasize. Personally, I graduated from the screenwriting department (at the renowned Czech film school FAMU) and I know how much my work as a writer has helped me with my movies.” (Ciment, [1987], 1996, p. 307)

Perhaps screenwriter Paul Schrader offers the best definition of what screenwriting and film direction should be.

“Whenever you dream, you turn your problems into metaphors. Everyone does this all the time. Every time you daydream or have a sexual fantasy, you create a story that allows you to resolve a personal problem. That is already the beginning of a screenwriter’s work (...) What you need to do, is to learn to codify (this fantasy), to organize it, so that it can become two hours of entertainment that people will accept to pay to watch.” (Ciment, 1996, p.307)

When Schader sought a metaphor for loneliness, he found the taxi driver character (Taxi Driver, 1976, screenplay by Paul Schrader; direction by Martin Scorsese). When he became interested in a metaphor for a man incapable of loving, he developed the gigolo character (American Gigolo, 1980, written and directed by Paul Schrader).

With this system of metaphors, both dramatic narration and visual and auditory inventiveness are of equal importance. Many of the greatest filmmakers have directed nothing but daydreams: Federico Fellini, Emir Kusturica, David Lynch...They approach scriptwriting through metaphors (or premises) and direction as building a world that oscillates between realism and fantasy, like in a dream.

One possible teaching approach would be to set up a film project around a premise and how it can take form visually.

If teaching someone how to be an artist can be considered a false claim or a myth (since no technique will grant anyone talent), this should not mean that no teaching is possible. A teaching approach involving imposing limits seems very appropriate in the field of filmmaking.

3. A film is always made within the context of production

Possible financing options will vary, depending on what sort of project is involved (fictional or a documentary), how long it is (a short or feature film) and who the potential audience is. (Though it is always difficult to gauge what segment of viewers will be interested by a movie. Some genres are more promising, and some approaches more commercially appealing than others.)

A teaching approach involving limitations means having learners consider the parameters that they will be confronted with, when making a film. Constraints may touch on several levels: imposing a theme, a time limit, and a limited number of shooting days and sets. Once the game rules are set up, they are to be followed. This approach consists in pushing the students or workshop participants as far as possible, so that their work can blossom within a given framework, through ongoing discussions with the teacher.

The screenwriting teacher will ensure that an idea, a dramatic narrative, can be built, that a story develops. This is done by leading the apprentice project director to discover the flaws in the characters or plot, so that the learner can find on their own solutions. Even more than a psychoanalyst (who listens - and listening is important), the screenwriting teacher has to ask questions, to examine the story's plausibility and to eventually make suggestions, without imposing his or her own solutions on the filmmaking apprentice.

The leader of a film direction workshop will ensure that the intentions of the film direction and script work together synergistically. Like a producer, the workshop leader's intervention will mostly take place before filming (including discussion about the crew, the cast and how to shoot) and then again during editing (how to rebuild the movie from the footage, to have the courage to stop thinking about the original script and to compose from what is there in the footage). Like the screenwriting teacher, the film direction teacher trains students through dialogue, and should help the apprentice director to make the film clearer. The teacher has to follow the film's development, ensuring that coherent choices are made by the student, without ever attempting to take the student's place. Stephen Frears noted, "Sometimes you have to let them make mistakes, so that they discover, on their own, what works and what doesn't work." At a film school, in a university or in a film direction

workshop... we have more freedom to experiment...than in a “professional” production. We are there with an investigative approach.

4. It’s possible to write a script for a blockbuster. Finding the means to direct it is another matter

“Know what my means are, and be sure of them,” wrote Robert Bresson in *Notes sur le cinématographe* (1975). “Good” screenwriters must first make sure that they have access to the funding needed to filming what they are writing. This consideration (also called the “reality principle”) is essential in a screenwriting course or workshop. For example, there is no point in working on the adaptation of a novel or a short story that one hasn’t acquired the rights to. The screenwriting professor needs to warn class and workshop participants about the production snags they are likely to encounter.

At the same time, the “reality principle” shouldn’t intimidate the learner. French film is suffering, in part, from the channeling (one might almost say a cannibalization [2]) of genres that dominate French film, into the same direction: the “French-style comedy” (with dialogue meant to be funny and very little visual inventiveness) and “French-style” art house films (dealing with the existential problems of hipster couples). Developing projects that go beyond these patterns can offer a terrific breath of fresh air.

Teaching screenwriting means coaching the imagination, stimulating original projects and making space for new unique ways of working.

Even when a script is written in a workshop, one needs to always keep in mind that the script will ideally be made into a movie. If not produced, the work remains unfinished.

Screenwriting workshops are not always followed by direction workshops (allowing to make the film written), often for budgetary reasons.

What means are available to students of public or private film schools, universities and high schools offering film direction workshops?

Eric Rohmer said that when one has amateur means, it is better to use these to their fullest, rather than develop a narrative and directorial approach requiring resources that one doesn’t have access to [3]. Most amateur movies suffer from amateurism, because they do not accept what they are, and they pretend to be “something else” [4]. Many films made in universities or in film schools suffer both from substanceless narratives (with fake issues and ghost-like characters) and from the vain desire to show technical prowess. (There is nothing worse than idle demonstration.) There are also the schoolish films (unachieved works, in both narrative and form) that aim to be funny, but, like home videos, appeal only to those who play in them. A “student film” is to be avoided. The film direction teacher’s job is to banish any complacency and any “idea about film” that is nothing but posturing.

5. A self-produced film with no budget also has its own limitations.

The evolution of technology allows to make film on a much smaller budget than in the past. Affordable cameras, microphones and editing software give new generations of filmmakers and technicians the opportunity to make movies much more flexibly. Thus, the “thought” in the film becomes more crucial than ever. In this regard, teaching filmmaking makes a lot of sense.

Should screenwriting and film direction be taught by the same person or by two teachers who interact with the same group of students or participants? There are some excellent professors who do not have an extensive filmography, just as there are major screenwriters and directors who do not manage to transmit their art (or simply prefer to work on their own projects. Teaching can be a vocation and always requires a large investment of time).

6. What are the skills required to teach scriptwriting and film direction?

To teach screenwriting and film direction, the professor must be able to pass on questions that a screenwriter or a filmmaker asks him or herself. The questions are often the same, from one project to another: What is the dramatic intent? What are the filmic device options?

It's the answers that vary.

To be familiar with the scriptwriter and director's questions, and to be able to accompany different answers, it seems preferable for the teacher to know about film and not to be steeped in theory. How can one manage that, without at least once having written a screenplay that has been produced; without having at least once directed a film? Certainly, having written and directed a short film is not enough to enable the teacher to pass on the dramaturgical and aesthetic issues involved in filmmaking. The “guide” will ideally have participated in a feature film. A feature film raises questions about plot, rhythm, form, and production.

The “guide” will wish to be amazed by students, yet will remain uncompromising with them and will remain curious, will enjoy discovering new stories, new directorial risks, and will not fall into a fascination with originality at any cost. Such a teacher will be happy to see faithful students flourish, in a creation that belongs only to each of them.

Are the above a set of instructions, suggestions, observations? Certainly a little of all that.

Two obstacles are to be avoided. Teaching must not impose fixed rules that the student need only apply. Such an approach would be opposite from the very notion of creation. Teaching creation should not leave students to total freedom, without any support. This approach is would be contrary to the very principle of passing on knowledge.

To say “film direction workshop” is to say “selection process”.

This selection can take place either when creating the group or when establishing the projects that will be

led by one learner or another, since the number of films produced in a direction workshop will necessarily be limited. We do not believe in an approach that consists in having all students make a film together, without establishing any clearly defined tasks or responsibilities, without a clearly determined director and project leader. This approach, often found in high schools, as well as in certain universities offering practical courses... seems like the antithesis to the very nature of film (Sojcher, [2005]2011).

Education about screenwriting and filmmaking can be done partly through workshops and partly through lecture classes. Showing and analyzing clips from major films will nourish overall reflection on narration and directorial choices. Pierre Jenn explains how *Sunset Boulevard* (1949) follows the principles of exposition, incitement of the incident, the protagonist, the antagonist, and the subplot. (Jenn, 1991) Many Hitchcock movies allow us to see how important technical instructions are. (In *The Birds*, 1963, the sequence in which the birds gather around the school is a model of efficiency, as we see a rise in suspense, through the scale of the shots.) It's not so much a question of a theoretical study, but rather an exegesis.

In screenwriting and filmmaking classes, clips from films can also be shown, side by side with the participant projects. It will then be a question of working on possible sources of inspiration: movies not to copy, but to discover, possibly to later leave behind. A film is built in layers, often dialectically. Looking at works of reference may be one of the necessary steps to building one's own project.

7. What role can teaching screenplay writing and film direction play in film studies curriculum?

Film theory and (the practice of) filmmaking courses are not approached in the same way and sometimes tend to be opposite. Theory is linked to a discipline. This discipline may be history, art philosophy, semiotics, sociology, economics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, related to "gender studies" or "cultural studies"... or it can combine several of these disciplines. Whatever means of deciphering (or the combination of approaches to interpretation) is used, a film can not be reduced to its analysis.

A seemingly simple question is: Film analysis, to what end?

Film is exploited by historians to discuss history, by philosophers to evoke philosophical concepts, by art philosophers in order to grasp formal questions... and why not? Yet, we need to remain aware that, in these analyses, one is evoking something other than filmmaking.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to know all the ins and outs of the genesis of a film, and what motivated this or that choice. Creation is a path. It includes all the decisions made, from the first idea of the film, to writing the screenplay, to direction, to editing, to the final mixing.

Film historians, theorists and economists... should, once in their lives, spend a day on a shoot in a production company...so as to grasp to what point the concepts they put forth are the fruit of a particular context. Inventiveness in film is to be found at the crossroads between direction and script choices, as well as amidst

production limitations.

The problem is that creation work cannot be seen if one doesn't participate. There is nothing more tedious than just standing there watching a shoot...as a viewer, who understands nothing of what is happening.

According to Alain Bergala, there can be no passing on of knowledge about film, without personal experience of filmmaking issues:

"I am more and more convinced that there can not be, on one side, an education of the viewer, which would certainly, by its nature, be limited to viewing, deciphering, and training in critical thinking, and, on the other side, an education of taking action. There could be an educational approach which focuses on creation, just as much when watching movies as when making them. Of course we should establish such a global approach to creation, when teaching film as an art form. Looking at a canvas, while asking oneself the questions the artist asked him or herself, and trying to share the doubts and emotions that the painter experienced during creation, is not the same as looking at a painting, while confining oneself to the emotions of the viewer." (2002, p.22-23)

These words were written as part of a mission for the Ministry of Education for which Alain Bergala was asked to consider what type of film education could be offered as early as in primary school. However, it is difficult to imagine all primary school age children participating in a practical filmmaking course necessarily being able to understand certain issues around creation. How many teachers would be able "watch a movie while asking themselves about the filmmaker's questions?" We are close, with Bergala, to the mythology of "all artists". For Nietzsche, "Art speaks only to artists." How can we find a common ground between an elitist approach and a utopian egalitarianism?

Transmit what, to whom and to what purpose?

Film as an opening to the world (in primary school, middle school and high school); as a link between practice and thought (at University); as a technology serving a work of meaning (in film schools or workshops), this would be our credo.

7. Footnotes :

[1] Gai savoir, from the title of a 1882 publication by Nietzsche can be loosely translated to "Joyful Skill" originally referring to the art of composing poems.

[2] In the original French version of this article, the words for channeling (canalisation) and cannibalizing (cannibalisation) are close in sound, making a play on words.

[3] Interviews of Eric Rohmer with Jean Douchet, in the documentary film, Cinéastes de notre temps; Eric Rohmer, preuves à l'appui, directed by Labarthe, A. S. (1994). Paris, AMIP Production, (2 x 52 minutes).

[4] Directed by Sojcher, F., the documentary, Cinéastes à tout prix draws a portrait of three film directors who make feature films on a shoestring, while exploring different cinematographic genres (war film, fantasy, epic film...) with no means and no producer. These directors, who enroll crews who follow them for decades. There is such a desire for film, that the process itself becomes fascinating. They break down the notion of "amateur film", allowing something else to emerge: a taste for the marvelous (2005). Saga Films (65 minutes).

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