

DING AN SICH

THOUGHTS ON A VIABLE PRODUCTION CURRICULUM

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WHAT IS A SPECIAL FILM? It is difficult to find the precise words to define a festival-worthy film. (To clarify: It's not de facto festival status that matters; I use 'Festival-worthy' here only as a signifier of specialness.) The terms: individualistic, peculiar, idiosyncratic, fresh - these terms hover close to the idea but miss the mark. Special films defy categorization. They are *Ding an Sich*, *The thing In Itself*. (Pardon me if you already know this term. It was new to me...) Curators, these days, process so many submissions that seemingly remarkable films - they're beautifully designed, say, or tightly structured or well performed or laced with elaborate special effects - these films are politely acknowledged then summarily ignored. (It's like a suburban white male high-schooler with a 4.0 trying to get into the Ivy Leagues. Forget about it.) Curators perk up though when a something 'special' comes along.

A special film is not simply quirky or gratuitously odd - different for difference sake. It helps to ask the question, "Who else could have made this movie?" If the answer is No One, then the film is *Ding an Sich*. With special films we sense genuine conviction, rigorous honesty, an almost effortless understanding of timing and pitch. We sense something whole, *before* we can tease apart the film's individual strengths. For argument's sake only, here are example student films with a presence out in the big world:

Dimitri Khouri	¿Qué? (Redstones and others)
Wes Palmer	You Are Here (Redstones)
Safdies	Back of Her Head (Cannes)
Oliver Shahery	Portle (Salem Documentary Festival Short Film Winner)
Helen Yuwen Jiang	Ears of Cherries (Redstones, Cilect)
Nellie Kluz	Young Bird Season (Big Sky Festival and others)

What do these films have in common? At first glance, nothing. This is the point. The films are *themselves*; direct products of a singular voice. They could only have been made by that student. Of course, it goes without saying, 'singular voice' in the filmmaking world, is the product of collaborative efforts.

And yet, upon second glance they *do* have a couple things in common:

1) Location-driven storytelling - both in terms of cinematography and story. True, location-driven storytelling in itself does not guarantee a good film. But, think of Wes' film, how the RV in the Mall works as a *character*. Or, how the locations in *Ears of Cherries* *drive* compositions: door frames, shop front tableaux, terraces in deep space - these compositions exude the gritty integrity of *intention*. Location-driven storytelling makes it easier to *integrate* - as opposed to *dominate* - the role of performance with the other critical elements of film storytelling. Locations evince more organic storytelling by easing the pressure off of performance as the sole engine of the story.

2) These films cannot be transferred to the stage or become podcasts or books with glossy photos: these 'stories' *could only have been told in the language of film*.

And this is the crux: What is this language? Of course we know the components - the visual ones of composition and scene coverage being the most obvious. But the one component that is the most difficult to teach is *how stories unfurl when locked on to a linear timeline*. And this is how Production I contributes the most. We finally have enough time to get this critical element of film storytelling in place.

THE INDIVIDUAL VOICE: THE FILM STORY Storytelling requires skill in *both* Input and Output systems.

Output - the tools of our trade - is something we all teach well. What we may not stress enough is *Input*. Perceptual skills. This is a tough concept to get across, especially when dealing with screen-oriented millennials, students who've spent their early years in mini-vans watching DVDs instead of looking out the window, learning how to *observe*.

Here's the rub. If a student develops her observational skills - her *input* system - she has a chance to produce a story that, by definition, feels original since no two people perceive the things in the exact same way. Her individual voice begins to emerge.

For example: Every Safdie story emerged from observation. The Muslim cashier in the convenience store, the polar bear on 5th avenue, the homeless girl waiting abjectly by the train station. Josh, in particular, has an almost uncanny Buster Keaton-esque sensitivity for the storytelling possibilities provided by the frame alone. (Note here: I do not mean to elevate the Safdies unreasonably. We have many other strong filmmakers extant. It's just that the Safdies were observant filmmakers when they *arrived* in our program. We can all be proud of the fact that, essentially, we didn't mess them up too much.)

PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS Few people have a *fiction* story in them to tell. Compare the length of the Fiction column in the New York Times Book Review with the Nonfiction column. The latter is far longer.

Few people, even if they *do* have a story, know how to *tell* it well - using words, much less *film language*. (Consider your last dinner party and ask yourself who controlled the room, who created that crackling, lively atmosphere of suspense and then provided satisfying pay-off? Not so many can do this.)

Yet. We think it is possible for people who have not been out of their dorm rooms or looked up from their phones or crossed the Mississippi or read Tolstoy - in short, we think people who *have not yet begun to live* can dream up a fiction story and then deliver it well in film form? Oy vey.

If we re-align our expectations to match what is possible we then find a way to help students find their cinematic home, their mode of expression. Students discover they might be: episodic producers, experimentalists, narrative doc makers, production designers. They might even be dramatic fiction filmmakers!

But these choices emerge *only* if we've done our job teaching the fundamentals: The deeper we go in the beginning, the higher we fly in the end.

PROGRAM FLOW In fact, we already have the teaching skills and resources to produce films in a full range of genres. It's a matter of coordinating our efforts. Special films do not come from finding brand new stories or inventing brand new techniques. It's the magical intertwining of the two - form *and* content - that creates entirely new work. This is the hard part to teach and why the one-two punch of FT 201/ Prod I is so crucial.

INTRO LEVEL	Foundation: What is a movie? Emphasis on Form
INTERMEDIATE	Stories best told in film language. Emphasis on Content
ADVANCED	Balance of the two.

(The following curriculum path relates specifically to Boston University. I include here, in case you're curious.)

PRODUCTION I

Prod I is close to working right now. With the few extra weeks we gain by tweaking some projects we can produce a higher percentage of polished final films that are genuine reflections of an individual voice *and*, lo and behold, they come with a true narrative drive - an engine and a structure. We have a chance to teach actual storytelling in film language.

This is another way of saying that by tossing in a sync assignment at the last part of the semester you wreck the essence of the course - the stuff that take an entire semester to teach - without even remotely addressing the real problem behind Prod II. You're taking the soufflé out of the oven prematurely.

It is comparatively easy to teach the visual components of filmmaking: composition, lighting, camera to subject interrelationships, the frame itself. By "easy" I only mean you can use logic and rationality to explain these concepts. This is because the visual signal - the optic nerve - is primarily cognitive. What we've always needed was more *time* to teach the hard stuff:

Sound and Time. The unfurling of a story along a locked and linear time line. (Or, as my famous author friend Mimi Lipson writes - "It's a matter of sequencing ideas: trying to get three fat men through the doorway at the same time.") With the exception of music, a locked and linear timeline is unique to our medium.

Grappling with this idea early and often builds this crucial storytelling element in from the get go.

Put it another way: If we're teaching VR or gaming or any *inter-active* storytelling medium then the argument shifts. Entirely. In fact, contemplating the way VR works is helpful since it underscores precisely what makes *linear* time-dependent storytelling so compelling. Check out [A recent piece](#) by Andrew Marantz in The New Yorker. Everyone acknowledges VR's power to deliver immersion, a sense of *being there*, but without 'a narrative' its remains merely a cool experience, a tunnel ride at Disney.

A couple VR producers explain a scene that only worked once they "*limited the viewers' options and oriented them toward the action...*" Delicious irony here - that it is the limitations, the filmmaker's control of time, that does the storytelling. A true story, of the kind that grips you and transports you works *because* the audience does not have control of time. That's the whole point of linear narratives. (I also use the roller-coaster analogy. If you were to pause

at the top of the first hill and be given a choice of your next move the magical spell of the ride would disappear. What makes a roller coaster (a linear medium!) so compelling is *its control over you.*)

Hard Thing To Teach #1. Sound. The stuff about octaves and dynamic range - this part's easy. What's difficult is teaching how the emotional power of sound works *through the passing of time*. How an unrelenting 24 frames per second rate somehow *feels*, to the audience, like hours or nanoseconds. How a story with an engine sucks us in helplessly, the way a semi truck hurling down the highway creates a vacuum.

This concept is easy to understand but hard to execute because it *cannot* be learned through lectures alone - it must be experienced. The aural nerve signal, due to its convoluted and archaic neural pathway, affects the peripheral nerve system *before* it reaches the cranial system. Which is to say, sound is a *visceral* phenomenon. (For example, the smartest person in the world cannot control, resist or be unaffected by the sound of nails on a board.)

So. Both teaching and learning how sound travels along a timeline takes *trial and error*. I can help a student understand how and why her composition is messed up in a few minutes. To help a student fix her slushy, annoying, ponderous, off-putting sound track could take hours experimentation. Some of my smartest students have the most difficulty with editing and sound design because they've rationalized sound passing, instead of *felt* it. It's like teaching a tone-deaf person to dance.

But the most profound element of sound passing through time is that this is the essence of storytelling in film language. As they say of a good comedians: *it's all in the timing.*

Hard Thing To Teach #2 that the power of a given composition depends on its *placement in the sequence* as much as, if not more, than its inherent framing. It is tempting to equate certain compositions with certain emotions: low angle = power, tight shot = intimacy, empty horizon = loneliness. Yet, you can find counterexamples among all great filmmakers. (For example, the most 'intimate' shot in Fanny and Alexander - of the mom cradling her damaged son - is 'told' by placing the camera high up and far away.) A shot's emotive power is a relative and *time-based* phenomenon.

if you skip these hard concepts and jump to the directing of actors without having cinematic language firmly installed in your deep viscera, it becomes dangerously easy to make film-of-theater.

Production I Modifications The most efficient way to teach fundamentals is by imposing limits. In the process of grappling with limits, the student abandons her recent Netflix episode and, instead, hunkers down, taps into an brand

new resource within herself. One of the most productive exercises in my Prod I course forces students to work within severe limits of time, space and props. Some of these exercises have produced better work than their final films.

1) Let the professor pick the final three films. (Students tend to pick their pals, the class pets.)

2) Remove photography assignment.

3) Add story-generating exercises forcing one formal element to "do the driving." Examples:

- Edit a story from 32 unrelated pre-determined shots - all shots contain movement - then design and build a sound track. Students discover how sound provides emotional drive and cohesion.
- Tell a story where three props - ball, feather and a glass of water - play a crucial role
- Deconstruct a scene from a feature film into its essential ingredients of character and motivations. Then re-tell it in your 'words.'
- Model a story along a Rube Goldberg structure
- Devise a story using two of the three color palette components.

PRODUCTION II

With exceptions, of course, we often see:

- Stories written beyond students' ability to tell them in *film language*. Not just in terms of production values but, more important, in terms of students' understanding their characters' dilemmas in the first place. Why are 19 year olds writing stories from the perspective of a middle-age divorcee? What in the world do our students know about a middle-aged couple's crisis? (After all, Michael Haneke was 70 before he took on Amour.)

- Generic, *derivative* stories, sketches or mere gestures: stories that essentially reflect students' exposure to recent movies and episodic TV. How many of our students actually dash up and down alleys with guns, bursting into dorm rooms, murdering zombies?

- Stories without a proper shape and denouement. Students know how to build up tension appropriately, get us on board, but then they dump us at the crisis point and roll credits. This is because they themselves don't know how to resolve the crisis. So, they "leave it up to the audience." (Oddly, 4 of the 5 Cilect films I've watched so far *also* end too *conveniently*. Yes. Storytelling is tricky.)

- Films that reflect dysfunctional crew chemistry. And, no - this *cannot* be solved by us doing a better job of "teaching them how to work together." Some students are too messed up as individuals to learn how to work together.

For example, this semester, by sheer luck, I happen to have had 16 convivial people in my Prod II course. (How often does this happen?) Four groups zinged along harmoniously in crew formation within a mere couple weeks. This is for two reasons: 1) These students had deep foundational exposure to the basics of sound and picture and, 2) as individuals, each was an emotionally healthy human being, which is to say, 'teachable' when it came to collaborative work.

An aside: Although one group functioned well as a *collaborative team* they still produced a seriously crummy film. Turns out not one member of that group had had foundational training in Prod I. They had *no idea* how to compose even, much less deal with time-related variables. All the more reason to stress foundational stuff in Prod I.

Production II Modifications Re-consider our expectations again. Somehow, we think it's possible that four people with different personalities and skill sets can work together to produce fresh, engaging, original stories. Prod II is an *intermediate* course: as is true of most fields, the intermediate level almost always involves *lateral* learning.

We should decide. Teach storytelling in film language or sync production? It is not possible to do both in one semester. If students arrive with a *viable* script in hand then, maybe, keep the final film project. If not, remove the final film entirely as an end goal. Here are some thoughts for generating content:

For the first half of the semester. Run students through a series of exercises, rotating crew positions. Each exercise isolates, and thereby promotes, a particular film language component or story-telling challenge. (Similar to our list we devised for CMP challenges.)

In all cases, students write the scene from *within* the particular constraint. Furthermore, teaching the process of directing actors within the exercise format keeps the scenes safely out of the danger zone: of becoming film-of-theater. The idea is to build the essence of movie-making into the deep fabric of the story itself. Examples:

- Lighting: Think of the (practically) continuous take in The Graduate where Hoffman re-lights the hotel room in nervous anticipation of meeting Anne Bancroft. The entire scene is told through light. Or, the Prison scene in The Man Who Wasn't There. The only "prop" in the room is a shaft of light.

- Sound: shoot a scene with dialogue (given time and character parameters). Then re-write it without.
- Coverage: Shoot a short scene three ways: 1) continuous take. 2) classic sequence. 3) montage.

For the second half of the semester impose story *structures* on the students: Take a single linear script and re-structure it in terms of its flow through time. Examples:

- **Monocle** (start the movie in the middle of a critical plot point, then backtrack until you arrive at the plot point again, then continue on with the story towards the denouement.) The structure is essentially a circle with a tail - the bread and butter structural vehicle for ensemble British drama.
- **Victorian** The Classic 4 act structure. Grab us, develop the plot, take us through the crisis, then leave us with a sub ending and the surprise *real* ending.
- **X shape** Two characters begin as antagonists but transfer personality traits so that by the end of the film, each has taken on character elements of the other. The momentum for the story comes from this inherent collision course caused by personality transference.

AT THE END OF THE DAY There are people in the world who think they cannot dance. But this is because they have not learned how to hear the music. In order to give our students a chance to *hear the music* we have to give them a little more *time*, let them try again.

Prod I is close to working and now, with FT 201 flying along, we can snag a couple more weeks and thus optimize this course. This makes it possible for our students to work their way through the upper levels, *learning to dance* along the way.