

# CALIFORNIA DREAMING

## The Teaching of Motion Picture Production

by Robert Miller

Film is often referred to as *the* art form of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, cinema has become the focus of intense academic investigation in institutions of higher learning throughout the world. An American Film Institute survey indicates that over 1067 colleges and universities across North America offer programs in film studies: production, history, criticism, writing, animation, business, etc.<sup>1</sup> Yet, cinema is still very much a newcomer to the realm of academe vis-à-vis established disciplines such as English literature or philosophy.

Film differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from the more traditional venues of scholarly inquiry. So it is not particularly surprising to discover that questions of pedagogical strategies, accreditation criteria and curriculum development are topical issues confronting most faculties concerned with the study of media on a theoretical and/or practical level. From the perspective of motion picture production a number of basic pedagogical assumptions come to mind immediately:

- 1) How does the process of filmmaking interface with broader humanistic/liberal arts concerns?
- 2) Can media production courses be integrated into the university curriculum or are they best placed under the umbrella of a professional training school?
- 3) Should film be taught from the perspective of personal artistic expression as opposed to an approach reflecting audience needs along with the practical exigencies of business or industry?

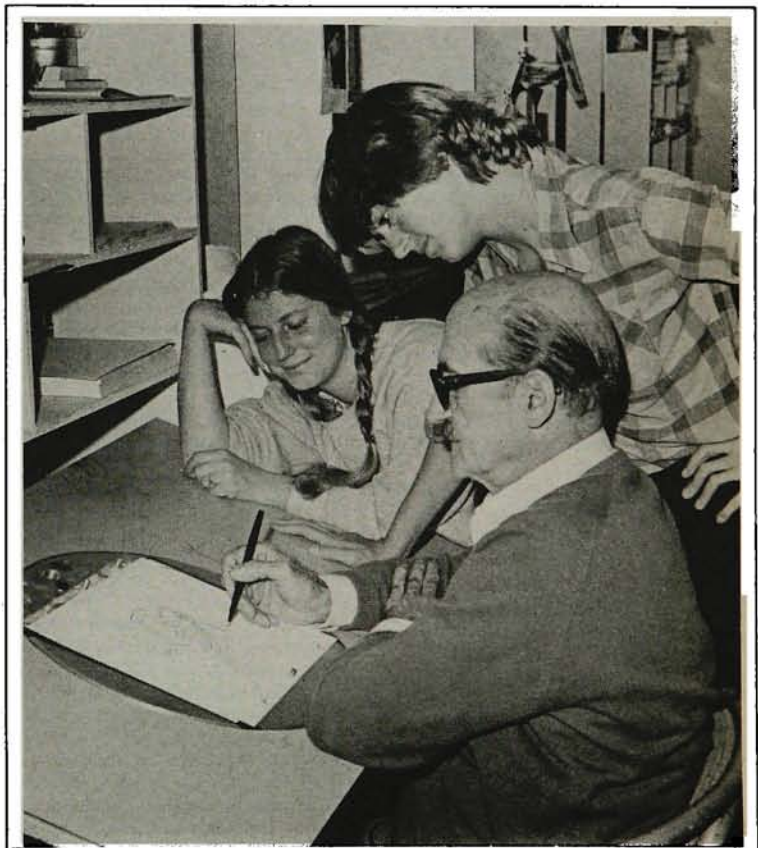
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Certainly there is no panacea. Perhaps it is not even a question of selecting one strategy over another, but of integrating all three perspectives into a single coherent instructional design. The nominal point of attack, however, must be an evaluation of the strengths of film programs as they exist today, co-ordinated with an extrapolation to a "best of all worlds" situation. To this end, it was decided to examine the cinema programs offered by three major American schools: the University of Southern California, the California Institute of the Arts and the American Film Institute.

These programs were selected because they embody three distinctively different approaches to the study of film as a medium of communication. The U.S.C. Division of Cinema/Television is of interest since it is one of the oldest, most successful motion picture departments in the United States, yet has managed to develop within the confines of a traditional university environment. Thus it has had to balance questions of professionalism with much broader requisites of providing a well-rounded undergraduate education. To cite the Division's bulletin,

*the overall purpose of the curriculum is to educate students in the responsibilities of filmmakers towards themselves and society, in the creative and technical complexities of the medium, and in its history and influence upon our culture. Cinema and television is considered an art, a craft and an industry.*<sup>2</sup>

Experimentation and the evolution of unique aesthetics is the point of view embraced by the California Institute of the Arts. Emphasis is placed squarely on



• "A commitment to the avant-garde": Cal Arts' Jules Engel

personal expression – the cultivation of "curiosity and risk, rather than caution and repetition."<sup>3</sup> The perspective can best be described as painterly with students being encouraged to push beyond the ordinary, embracing the full range of artistic possibilities inherent in any audio-visual medium be it film or video. Finally, the American Film Institute is representative of a conservatory approach to the training of filmmakers. The focus is clearly that of clarifying essential principles of film language, fostering critical skills, and transmitting professional standards of discipline and craftsmanship in all major production areas. Each of these programs offers a functioning model for the investigation of cinema as a medium of public communication.

**U.S.C. Division of Cinema/Television**  
The University of Southern California boasts one of the oldest film departments in the United States. It offers a veritable supermarket of courses spanning such diverse areas as production management, historical/critical studies, creative cinema and television, informational film/TV, directing, writing, cinematography, film and video editing, production design, graphic film/video, business, and sound recording. In all, the division lists over 150 courses in its calendar leading to six possible degree options: B.A., M.A., M.F.A., M.S.F., Ed., Ph.D.

Still, on the undergraduate level, priority is placed on the value of a broad liberal arts education. Majors spend two full years completing general education





● Making a statement about life and Kierkegaard

requirements before they even begin their cinema studies. And then, once in the program, the concept of communicating ideas effectively takes precedence over any promise of professional technical training. Dr. Russel McGregor, Co-Chairman of the Department, is adamant in this regard.

*We harbor very little guilt about sending a student out into the world with a particular occupational speciality. We're convinced they will be better insurance salesmen or whatever because they've had a good liberal arts education. Actually, Cinema is a lot more practical than other liberal arts majors because there is a lot of thinking and problem-solving involved. There is even a practical application of the principles of physics and psychology.*<sup>4</sup>

But, perhaps, the most important learning comes on the level of personal dedication. To successfully complete the undergraduate cycle – indeed to survive it – demands creativity, dedication and the ability to function in group situations. These are the kinds of skills that will stand a student in good stead regardless of his or her final career orientation.

On the graduate level the program becomes necessarily more craft-oriented. Technique, however, is taught as a means to an end – a mode of translating content from the written script to the screen. It is important for the filmmaker to master the various crafts involved with production but not to the exclusion of personal creativity. U.S.C.'s approach to technology is purposefully generalist. Again, Dr. McGregor:

*There is great value in knowing the entire production process. In the Eastern European schools the model is that of specialization. If you enter to learn sound you deal with recording techniques and that's all. You never touch a camera or a light or a moviola. We feel this narrow view is limiting. We believe it is important for someone who is going to deal with filmic ideas to have a first-hand knowledge of what creative sound,*

*editing and cinematography can bring to a motion picture.*

The U.S.C. premise, then, is that an individual wishing to express his world vision should be a complete filmmaker, not just a technician. That is, he or she should be conversant with the entire production process as an integral aspect of film language. Constant criticism and feedback is the matrix which renders the broad-spectrum methodology functional. Both faculty and students interfere with the creative act by challenging the filmmaker to justify every decision at each stage of a project's development. The school itself becomes the critical mass which any practitioner of a public art form must push against. This can lead to many bruised egos but, as Dr. McGregor points out,

*Our experience has been that the bright jewel-like personal films we see from other schools are not very illuminating. They tend to present rather banal statements because nobody ever challenges the artist on either a technical or an aesthetic level. Our approach may well foster a slick, commercial look which could offend people who are all for anti-fascist personal films that make a statement about life and Kierkegaard. But we think the experience is richer if the environment is highly critical from the original conception to the final festivalization of the picture.*<sup>5</sup>

Given such a perspective, it is understandable why U.S.C. has established its reputation within the area of the dramatic narrative. This is not meant to denigrate genres such as documentary or experimental. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the plethora of creative experiences offered by drama but not typically available in other forms.

A radically different regimen is espoused by Cal Arts, which was founded on "a commitment to the avant-garde."

**California Institute of the Arts**  
Cal Arts is the first degree-granting institution in the United States entirely de-

voted to the study of visual and performing arts. Initial impetus for the institute grew out of Walt Disney's experiences during the production of *Fantasia*. Disney brought together many artists from diverse fields only to discover they had very little knowledge of each other's discipline. They could not communicate efficiently because they did not speak the same visual language. Disney's concept was one of cross-pollination – an environment where the modern arts could be explored under a single roof permitting students to share a common learning experience. The end result was Cal Arts.

The institute presently comprises five distinct schools: Art, Dance, Theatre, Music and Film/Video. Within the Film/Video section there are three further areas of specialization. The Character Animation department is designed to train students in cell animation very much in the Disney tradition. Film Graphics focuses on a more free-form experimental style of animation and is less concerned with illustrative or narrative elements while the Live Action division deals with real-time cinematography or video.

Each division has its own individual style of training. The Character Animation program is highly structured, being designed to transmit a full range of professional cartoon-animation skills. Over a span of four years, students progress through distinct stages designed in consultation with the Disney Studios. Essentially, these stages are:

- 1) Life drawing, basic drawing, caricature, and color and design;
- 2) Form in motion incorporated with the use of dialogue, sound effects and music;
- 3) Full cell animation techniques; and,
- 4) Development of story content and characterization, study of mime, traditions of theatrical comic performance and graphic satire.

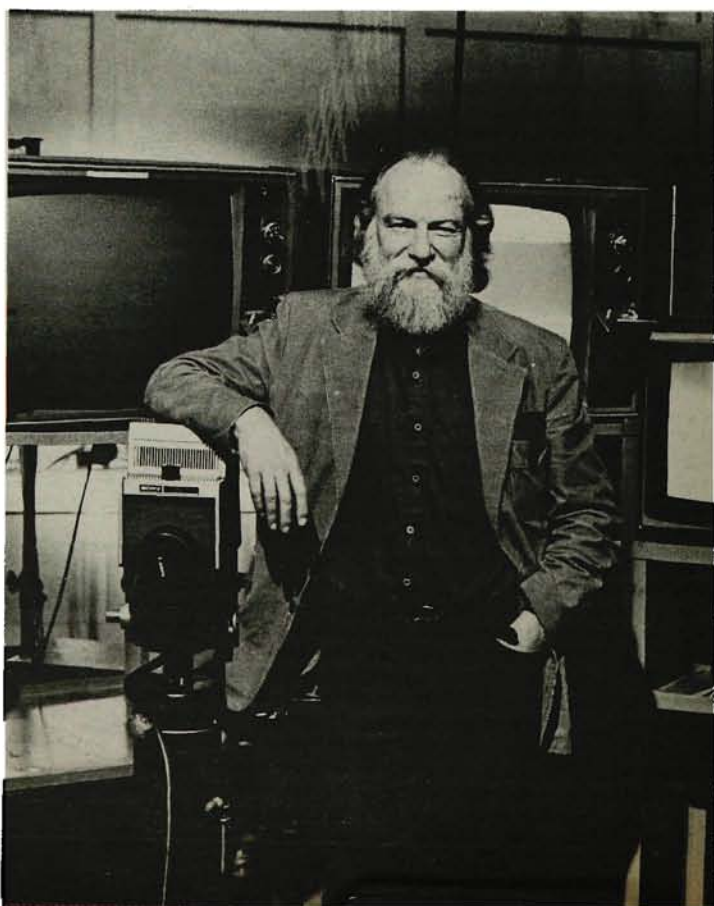
Film Graphics offers a much more free-form environment in terms of both the art work and the way it is taught. There is instruction in all animation techniques but most work is undertaken in the form of independent projects. The actual sequencing of course work is planned individually in consultation with a teacher-mentor in order to accommodate specialized student needs as closely as possible. Finally, live action begins with a year program centering on hardware and the various methods of structuring motion pictures. Beyond that it is possible to branch out in other forms such as documentary, writing, drama, video synthesis, film history, directing, etc.

Is there a unique Cal Arts point of view? Ed Emshwiller, Dean of the School of Film and Video, has this observation:

*We have a very diverse faculty and, if you sat in on our meetings, you would find that we are virtually a debating society on the nature of film. What we provide is a wide range of options for a student to experience, a broad spectrum of ideas from which they can freely choose. We don't push a line demanding students do ground-breaking avant-garde work or become extremely skilled craftsmen in the traditional narrative/feature sense. We try to provide a very experienced faculty in all areas and this is one of the things we take great pride in. So we offer an environment which will open the minds of students to filmic possibilities. Then, no matter what area they go into, they will have a rich selection of memories to inform their work.*<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the '60s generation, students of the '80s appear to be intensely career-oriented. This concern should also be reflected in the curriculum of any media school. Certainly, U.S.C. has been quite successful in placing gra-

● "We don't push a line," says Cal Arts Film Dean Ed Emshwiller





duates in the film industry. Names like George Lucas, Randall Klieber, John Milius, Robert Zemeckis, Ben Burt and Walter Murch come to mind immediately. Yet, as Russ McGregor pointed out, any student with unique personal vision and a thorough technical grounding is well equipped to establish himself professionally. Cal Arts' reputation is particularly strong in the area of animation and, according to Ed Emshwiller, graduates seem to have little difficulty finding jobs.

Character animation students often get jobs before they even complete their degrees. They literally go directly into the studios. In Film Graphics, many students end up in special effects. Something like ten Cal Arts people were involved with Star Wars, for example. And students often form their own little production companies. I think what this school does offer (in terms of career preparation) is a non-standard approach to things. Consequently, while our students may not be as technically proficient as graduates from other schools, they are accustomed to thinking in terms of alternative approaches, which brings notice to them.<sup>9</sup>

Neither U.S.C. nor Cal Arts would characterize itself or, indeed, want to be considered as a trade school. The American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies, on the other hand, perceives itself as a conservatory having been established in 1967 to bring "together leading artists of the film industry, outstanding educators, and young men and women who wish to pursue this 20th-century art as their life's work."<sup>10</sup>

## A.F.I. Center for Advanced Film Studies

Situated in Los Angeles, the Center offers a highly professional curriculum in five areas of specialization: directing, producing, cinematography, screenwriting and production design. Financing for the Institute, which is the closest approximation of a national film school in the United States, comes from major motion picture companies, television networks, foundations, private donors and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Film Studies Center was designed to fulfill specific goals outlined in a special report prepared by the Stanford Research Institute of Pasadena, California. The report indicated a pressing need for professional training to bridge the gap between existing academic systems and industrial requirements. To this end, the Film Studies Center was charged with a seven-point mandate to:

- 1) advance knowledge of filmmaking technology and equipment;
- 2) promote an understanding of film language in terms of cinematic principles and techniques;
- 3) provide experience in all major aspects of motion picture production;
- 4) familiarize students with related artistic subjects such as art, music, drama, etc.;
- 5) foster artistic judgment and skill in execution;
- 6) achieve high standards of artistic discipline and professional competence; and,
- 7) present an opportunity to exercise skills under professional conditions.<sup>11</sup>

These are a challenging set of goals but they virtually define the parameters of a well-rounded education in film production.

Studies are spread over a two-year period. The first-year Curriculum Program presents a highly structured investigation into the art of narrative filmmaking. Fellows are required to produce three video dramas while attending seminars and courses directly related to their fields of specialization. Projects are screened in the Directing Workshop and analyzed in terms of such things as story structure, casting, dialogue, lighting, camera position, editing, etc. Talented students are then invited to the second-year Conservatory Program, during which time they must complete at least one major project on a budget of \$15,000. At this time, intensive tutorials supercede structured course work as faculty and professionals guide Fellows through each phase of production. Upon recommendation of the faculty, an M.F.A. degree is conferred upon candidates having successfully completed the Conservatory Program.

Antonio Vellani, Director of the Center for Advanced Film Studies, preferred to describe the A.F.I. process in terms of three essential experiences: observation, association and practice.

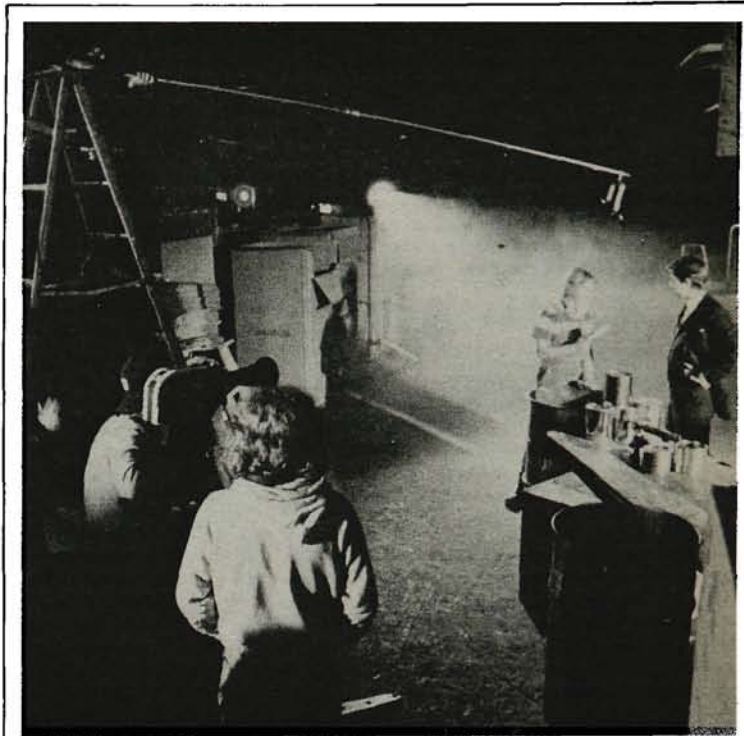
*By observation we mean the ability to look at a work on the screen and to understand its architecture from the point of view of a maker and not a viewer. Last year, for example, Dan Petrie conducted the Film Analysis course and analyzed every single shot in the film Sybil, which he did for television. The second level is association. We have an extraordinarily extensive seminar series conducted by professionals from Fellini to Truffaut to Rouben Mamoulian to Spielberg in which they share the experience of their craft. So, the students form associations with proven professionals. The third level is practice and this is where Fellows validate the experiences assimilated through observation and association.<sup>12</sup>*

A.F.I. students tend to be mature and all bring with them some previous experience with film or a related art form. They are firmly committed to cinema and are selected because they have demonstrated an intense desire to communicate their ideas through film. Thus the Center's primary concern is to crystallize the essential syntax and grammar of film language in relationship to the dramatic narrative.

*As hard as it might be, it is important to understand that we are in the business of communication with people and the audience is what counts. So you must be able to speak to the audience with clarity. The language has to be clear. Curiously enough we talk about syntax and grammar because a film school, like any other school, must often take an artistic experience and reduce it to scientific terms. So here we talk about rules and all of a sudden the student says, "My God, there is a formula!" At that time we tell them there are no rules. There will be a time when the language becomes so familiar that you will be able to break all the rules. Only at that time will the artist's instincts - his subconscious - come through and transcend the technology.<sup>13</sup>*

## Conclusions

It is possible, despite their divergent pedagogical viewpoints, to identify a number of interesting common perspectives within the programs of U.S.C., Cal. Arts and A.F.I. Most importantly, all



• The artist's subconscious instincts transcend technology

schools have understood film must be taught as a language system complete with its own history, culture, grammar and syntax. Second, all share a belief that critical insight is an essential element of the learning process. The ability to analyze what works or does not work in a motion picture furnishes a base of theoretical knowledge upon which a filmmaker can draw when structuring his own projects. A third common point was an awareness of the need to achieve a reasonable degree of professionalism in terms of facilities and technical instruction. There was a general sense of obligation to provide the minimum craft skills necessary to facilitate entry into the film industry. Finally, all three schools placed the highest priority on ideas and have gone to great lengths in structuring their curriculum so as to generate a learning environment which fosters personal creativity. These would seem to be the essential underpinnings of any program concerned with production be it in film, video, sound or any other medium of public communication. For a final comment, let us return to Antonio Vellani of the American Film Institute.

*In my opinion, the creative individual has two things to deal with, the desire to create and the fear of failure. These must be present and in balance. Fear of failure is the one thing which will sharpen your sense of taste and will push you to learn more. If you have no fear of failure but a lot of energy to produce, you will make junk. If the fear of failure is too high, then the energy to produce will be very low and the individual will become over-critical of himself. It will squash an idea which has the sparkle of originality before it ever appears.<sup>14</sup>*

Our responsibility as media educators, therefore, is double-edged. We must not only consolidate and transmit a body of knowledge but we must also encourage the expression of original ideas and themes which will connect with an audience on both an emotional and intellectual level.

<sup>1</sup> Dennis R. Bohnenkamp and Sam L. Grose, Jr., eds., *The A.F.I. Guide to College Courses in Film and Television*, (Princeton, N.J., A Peterson's Guides Publication, 1978). More specifically, the survey indicates American schools offer 4161 film courses, 3679 television courses and 1388 courses combining both media. Degree programs are available through 307 institutions. In Canada the indications are that 31 colleges or universities are involved with film or television in some form or other. These figures should be taken as approximations since less than 50 per cent of the subjects polled actually responded to the A.F.I. questionnaire.

<sup>2</sup> University of Southern California, *Bulletin of the School of Performing Arts, 1981-83*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Fitzpatrick, "President's Statement," in *California Institute of the Arts Academic Calendar, 1981-82*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. E. Russel McGregor, Co-Chairman of the U.S.C. Division of Cinema/Television, personal interview, L.A., July 17, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> California Institute of the Arts, *Admissions Bulletin, 1978-79*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ed Emshwiller, Dean of the School of Film and Video, California Institute of the Arts, personal interview, Valencia, CA, July 29, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, President of the United States, speech presented upon the signing of the National Arts and Humanities Act, Washington, D.C., September 29, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> American Film Institute, "Exhibit no. 1: Background and Educational Philosophy of the American Film Institute Center for Advanced Film Institute," p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Vellani, Director of the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies, personal interview, Los Angeles, July 23, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*