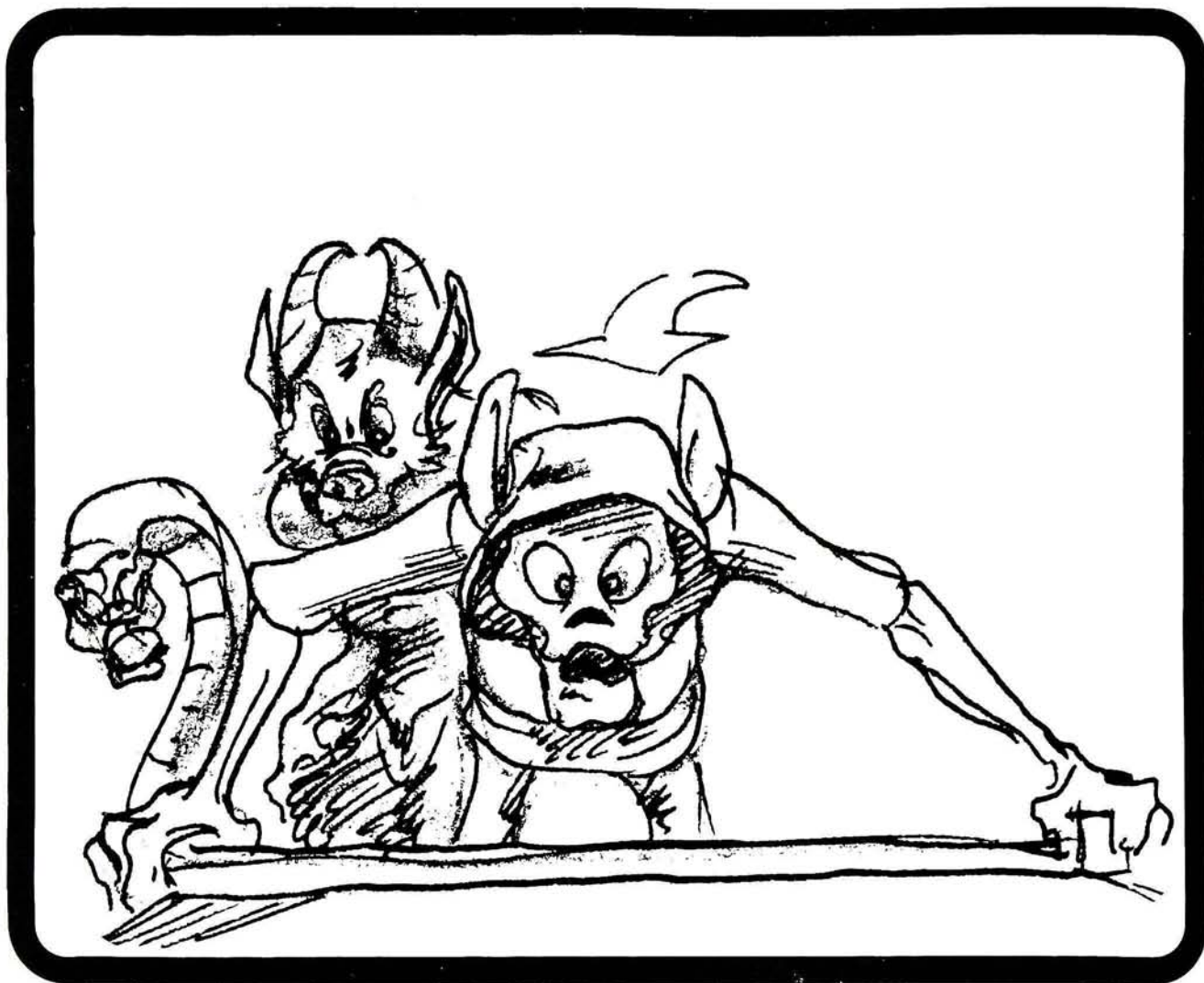


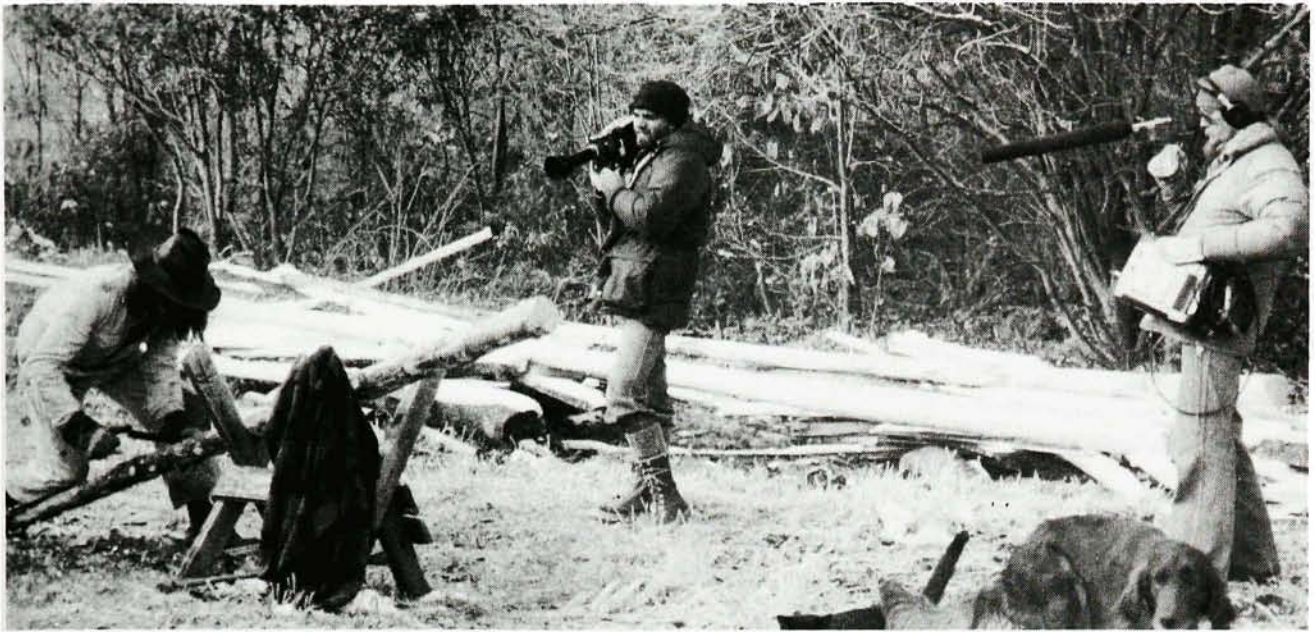
to teach or not to teach



From the story board of a Concordia student's animated film

Although few would question the teaching of film studies — history, aesthetics, theory — at the university level, there is some difference of opinion about the teaching of film production. Is it a trade? Is it an art? André Herman discusses the issue below.

by André Herman



As important as the amount of film equipment and its control is, the final product depends on the quality and ingenuity of the students' ideas

The above question may seem rhetorical, considering there are more than 1,000 film programs at American colleges and universities, and over 40 in Canada. Whether one likes it or not, film studies and the teaching of film production is at the university to stay. But closer scrutiny of the situation reveals several interesting points.

When the University of Southern California School of Performing Arts organized "An Invitational Conference and Workshop on Film/Video as an Artistic, Professional and Academic Discipline" in Los Angeles last August, it invited the representatives of only those 14 university film programs considered to be the leading ones in the United States. Only three programs from Canada were represented at the conference. (However, a roster of additional people from other universities and the industry was invited to give papers or respond to them.)

One of the consequences of this interesting conference was the creation of "The National Ad Hoc Forum of Film/Video Schools." At the moment of writing, it encompasses only those 14 American universities invited to the conference, plus Columbia University, which was taken in more on the strength of its potential than past achievement.

The events that took place in California last summer show that criticism of film education at the university comes not only from outside Academia, but also from within – the obvious difference being that while the teachers question standards and methods, the critics outside the university (those not directly involved in film teaching) question whether film education, and particularly film production education, should be offered in the university context.

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This article will, it is hoped, further the understanding of this issue, but first it will review the trend in film education in Europe, as compared to the North American experience. Many post World War II countries in Europe developed what became known as art schools which had little, if anything, to do with the university. It was assumed that fine arts education, which required of a student some creative potential if not outright talent, should be separated from those institutions that offer only research and knowledge such as a university. (Not to demean the traditional and noble role of the Alma Mater, bear in mind that in some countries even medical and polytechnical schools are considered professional schools and are thus independent from universities.) The fine arts status of film is not, in Europe, a fairly recent development, though it is in North America. In Europe, it has long been acknowledged that Film is to a large extent an industry; but equal recognition is given to the important second face of this Janus of Arts.

While there were few, though prominent, examples of art schools (eg., the Bauhause in Weimar, the Soviet Film School) in Europe before 1939, it was after 1945 that music, theatre, film, dance, painting, etc. were offered to students – those who passed the usually stiff selection process – in special fine arts schools which, of course, bore the appropriate different names.

There were film schools in most countries in Europe, sometimes more than one (Germany, England, France). Their differences notwithstanding, they had in common the basic premise of training *specialized* filmmakers in specialized career oriented sections of directing, cinematography, production management, etc. Graduates then would find their places in the established industry. This type of film school, presumably, does not exist in North America, even though some programs would like to think they fill this role and go so far as to use the name "film school."

What, then, are some of the consequences of the teaching of fine arts at the university, as it is practiced in Canada and in the United States? First, the democratic principle of open admission fills fine arts faculties with students who are not al-

ways best suited to take this course of study. The obvious result is that university programs become a general immersion type of education and certainly not a training ground for specialized members of the profession. If this sounds negative, it is not meant to. Although the author has the experience of a film school behind him, he does not consider this aspect of the situation at the university a weakness.

Film programs at the university should not train, rather they should offer knowledge. Film techniques and equipment develop and change so quickly, and procedures vary so widely from place to place, that serious university programs should concentrate on teaching methods and approaches rather than teaching familiarity with equipment instruction manuals. The major problem of many programs seems to be that students graduate with their heads full of technical information about how to operate a camera, tape recorder, editing machine, etc., and still do not know how films are made. No one tells them how to find the cinematic equivalent of their ideas, stories they like or topics they are concerned with. Technical "know-how" is necessary in order for the best visual or sound concepts to find their way to the screen. True enough. And complete disregard of technique, in any case, would be difficult, if not impossible, in teaching film production. But there is a proper approach to it. Technical instruction should include not only the "how to" part, but more importantly, its "what for" complement, constantly keeping in mind the content and purpose of film.

Studies conducted by the American Film Institute, the University Film Association and others, reveal that the film industry as a whole is not expecting students to be skilled technicians when they arrive on the market. Above all, it looks for

those who are spontaneous, creative, and full of fresh ideas. There is still lots of room for excellence, everywhere in the business.

The second consequence and, in fact, advantage of studying film production at university is the multidisciplinary environment students enjoy there. Indeed, through the elective system of degree requirements it is expected that students thoroughly explore this environment. The emphasis is on forming well-rounded independent filmmakers, as well as people with interests far beyond their direct professional occupation. For anyone seriously interested in filmmaking, this should be an absolute prerequisite.

This brings us to one of the most often voiced arguments against the teaching of film production, namely, why teach filmmaking to students who may have nothing to say in the first place? As logical as this may sound, there is a weakness to it. Why should we wait to teach the means of expression to students until we are sure that they know what to do with it? Do we hold off teaching kids reading and writing until we are satisfied that they know what to read and are able to write a novel or a short story? And who would be the one to decide when a student has reached the stage when he or she has "something to say" and, therefore, can commence learning how to make films? Nonsense. The only reasonable way to ensure they are not going to blow up the world with the toy we are giving them is to teach, in film production, not only the aesthetics of creation, but also its ethics. And this does not mean that one should give a special lecture on the topic; no, such ethics should be ever present in the program and part of the awareness of all instructors. It should be the instructor's duty to develop filmmakers who perceive in different ways but who have a common sense of responsibility.

Also a few words should be said about film "as a means of expression." This aspect of film is more interesting than the potential of film as a means of communication, not only because in the list of priorities one has to know how to express oneself before one can communicate, but also because of the fact that art has progressed through the ages more thanks to people who were expressing their talents through music, painting, poetry, etc., than thanks to communicators, however artful and necessary they can be on occasion.

Another argument often voiced against the teaching of film production is more prosaic and understandable. It is nicely called "saturation of the market." It happens more often that this "saturation" is more beneficial than detrimental to the development of art. It is not necessary to point out here how many (if not all) new trends in art were due to "saturation of the market" by the former establishment.

One example: in France before the advent of the New Wave, there were certainly no openings in the film market: members of the establishment were not welcoming new directors. When Roberto Rossellini came to Paris in 1960 to show his latest film, *Era Notte A Roma*, he stood at the door to welcome people to the press screening. And when the young François Truffaut extended his hand, Rossellini clearly did not accept it. Another more humorous story was told by Marcel Carné. When he noticed Claude Chabrol arriving to attend the same directors' union meeting that he was headed for, he left the elevator door open so that Chabrol would have to climb the six flights of stairs to the meeting. That is how saturated the market was. The rest, as they say, is history.



THE HUMAN ELEMENTS

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Quite a number of prominent filmmakers got where they are without taking any formal film education. While it is true they did not learn filmmaking through an institution, it is equally true that they had to learn it somewhere. Film education is a fairly recent development, so it is only normal that there are many people around who learned filmmaking by practising it. But perhaps such a discussion is a little academic... Just as two people are not alike, their paths to filmmaking won't and shouldn't be alike. For instance, several of our former students developed very nicely and would probably be wasted in an environment such as that at the National Film Board.

Young people in Canada deserve an alternative to those offered by a professional apprenticeship or by training with the National Film Board or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. This third alternative is now, and should be even more so in the future, film education in the university context. There, they should be able to find an environment and people genuinely interested in the development of their individual potential, whether it is that of a film realist or that of a film poet.

Unfortunately, not all university programs qualify in filling this role, for reasons too numerous to list here. To a large extent these reasons have economic origins. Film production education is expensive and logistically complex. One film program is worth mentioning, however, although it doesn't directly concern Canada and it originates out of another economic situation. What is being referred to here are the Southern California schools which operate under the constant spell of the vast motion picture and television industry. Far too often these schools find themselves catering to the industry. This is not exactly what the university and its programs should be there for. What is more, this is not what a great number of students are looking for at the university. They still want to learn how to make all kinds of films – including full length fiction films – but they want to learn to make them in an independent way rather than fitting in as small wheels in the big machine.

Some may say that since certain students cannot fit in as anything, anywhere, the former may not be such a bad situation after all. But one cannot be so sure... preferably one hopes to see young people making films by pooling their resources as they had to do at university, rather than knocking on the doors of the big guys. Only then can we expect something independent and original to happen.

“Independent” in the sense used here does not necessarily mean non-commercial; I do not find the word “commercial” relevant in this context. Art is not worse because it sells... and makes money, nor is it automatically better if it doesn't. Independent, then, means that the idea for a film starts in the mind of a filmmaker who later organizes a production around it, as opposed to a film idea that is born in the mind of a studio executive who sees an exclusively money making venture in it. At some point he calls in a director to make the film *for him*. There is nothing wrong with such a situation, but for a university professor it is of secondary importance.

Preparing students to be independent filmmakers is consistent, with giving them enough information and “hands on” experience to allow them to move into positions in the industry, if they so wish. Those who show a particular interest in a given field should be able – and are able – to assume the

responsibilities of the assistant director, assistant editor, production assistant, etc., even on full length feature productions.

However, the creative potential of students is paramount. Cultural, social, and political interests are important, and find their way into student films, and yet I believe what most matters is the students' visual and creative imagination. These qualities are not always easy to determine; a great deal of experience and understanding is required of the instructor. Not everyone who expresses an interest can teach, and this holds true for even some of the best professionals. While it is obvious that one cannot teach what one does not know, among those who do know, there are great and inspired teachers, as well as absolute educational antitalents. This is particularly so in fine arts where one is dealing with students' emerging sensibilities and concepts. Often they are not exactly in line with the personal preferences of the teacher, who must then suppress his or herself in order to be of assistance to the student. Contrary to popular opinion, I believe it takes not a weak but a very strong personality. (It is amazing to see the condescending manner in which most of North American society seems to relate to those of its members who help form the kids.)

While, at least, the leading filmmaking programs should give students an opportunity to put together film projects and learn some technical skills, this cannot be the only argument in favor of university film production courses. Students do not register in them expecting their graduation diplomas will part the waves for them. In fact, most know – and if they do not they should be made aware – that time spent in school represents a personal asset but does not necessarily convey any special career privileges. They study film and film production, above all, because film has become an inseparable part of our civilization and our life.

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