Student Films

What's wrong with student films? I am aware that this question can only be answered with generalizations, but I feel obligated to make these generalizations with the hope that next year's films just might be improved. Also I make them because I take student filmmakers seriously: They are the future of Canadian film.

Excessive length is a pervasive difficulty with student films. I think that every film in the Festival over ten minutes long would have been better if it had been cut by one third. This is a strong statement, but excessive length is a constant problem. Students seem unable to discard footage. I realize that each foot of film represents thought, effort and money, but students seem to regularly lose sight of their goal. The goal should be to make the best film possible, not to organize all the acceptable footage into a film.

The myth that there is a correlation between using lip sync sound and quality is one which needs to be destroyed. The statistics are clear: of the eight live action films receiving awards, only one was made with lip sync sound equipment. The statistics from last year are similar, but I am not just discussing statistics or winning a festival award. Student lip sync films are often afflicted with poorly written and delivered dialogue or with dull documentary footage. Why does this happen so often?

Students making scenario films with lip sync sound burden themselves with the problems of writing the dialogue as well as with the almost insoluble problem of finding people who can say the lines. Finding film actors and actresses is one of the major problems of English Canadian film, and I would like to think that students will eventually find the people to solve the problem. However, I have seen little reason to think that students can develop these actors and actresses for their first films. Students making lip sync documentaries face the normal risk of this kind of filmmaking: they may or may not find interesting subjects and their search may require shooting a lot of film. Professional documentary filmmakers budget for this; students can seldom afford the costs of the stock and often end up using lip sync footage which lacks the spark which can be found by a filmmaker searching through rushes from a 20 to 1 shooting ratio.

On the basis of looking at films with and without lip sync sound, I conclude that silent shooting allows students to use their imagination and to think exclusively in terms of images and editing. Lip sync shooting introduces an entire new series of aesthetic elements and seems to overwhelm many student filmmakers. Although I am arguing that students should free themselves from the myth of lip sync sound, I think that it is essential for students to make lip sync films. This is a contradiction, but there is an explanation: I think that students can make better films if they shoot silent. But I also think that students need to be educated in the technique of making lip sync films. A student who wants to work as a filmmaker must have experience with professional lip sync equipment. My suggestion is that students be conscious of the purpose of the films they make: They should make their winner with silent shooting, and they should make their lip sync film with consciousness that it is likely to be educational, but a loser. Students: Prove me wrong next year at the Festival!

The final problem with student films is the most serious one. The goal of many of these filmmakers appears to be to make a film without style; their ideal would be to make a film in which no cuts are noticeable, in which all camera movements are perfectly smooth, in which the soundtrack is absolutely clear. In short their nirvana would be to achieve a National Film Board level of professionalism. I wish their goal was much higher: art, style, the best film anyone ever made, craziness. I would prefer seeing brilliant failures to seeing pedestrian, competent tripe.