Resource reviews

THE EDUCATION OF THE FILMMAKER IN AFRICA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE AMERICAS

Hjort, Mette (ed.) (2013) The Education of the Filmmaker in Africa, the Middle East and the Americas (Global Cinema series), New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Review by Marion Campbell

The Global Cinema series promotes projects that re-think film studies and this publication presents twelve case studies of a wide range of innovative film school curricula and film education projects. It demonstrates how filmmakers globally can become a particular ‘kind’ of filmmaker that brings an informed integrity to the filmmaking process. The twelve case studies focus on film training in Nigeria, Palestine, Qatar, the United States (US), West Indies and South America and examine film schools in these countries/regions. The case studies highlight the importance of collaboration and potential benefits for students from both the global North and South. They provide specific examples of how this collaboration can develop valuable film education projects for children and marginalised groups such as street children in Brazil and unemployed youth in Nigeria.

The introduction to the book, written by the editor Mette Hjort, emphasises the important decisions that filmmakers need to make not just in terms of film production, but also in terms of whether the film is really worth making in the first place. Hjort suggests that the value of film schools and practice-based film education needs to be researched and his publication sets out to examine which institutions demonstrate examples of innovation, good practice and sources of learning. He also stresses the need for more financial support for film education and research which aims to ‘constitute networks and bodies of knowledge that can be mobilised in conversation with policy makers and government representatives’. As a practitioner based in Northern Ireland, I

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have used film as a tool for many successful outreach projects which have seen marginalised groups with deep religious and cultural differences work together as a team. Filmmaking as a process, if done well, is of great socio-economic benefit.

This book is structured into three parts: Part One on Africa; Part Two on the Middle East; and Part Three on The Americas. The first chapter, by Anton Basson, Keyan Tomaselli and Gerda Dullaart, looks at the history of film education in South Africa. It considers the values of the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance (AFDA), established in 1994 and unlike many other private film schools uses a collective filmmaking approach so that each crew member of a student production has a creative voice. There is also a brief analysis of the post-apartheid changes in television production and the boom in international feature film production which uses local crews, but has not greatly benefited the South African film industry.

The training which students receive at AFDA includes a work integrated curriculum, which is very beneficial given the high unemployment rate (25.2 percent) in South Africa and which demonstrates how the real life filmmaking experience and new contacts made in the field provide vital employability skills such as ‘positive work values and ethics and greater knowledge and skills’. The ultimate goal of the integrated learning process at AFDA is for students to showcase their films at a graduation festival that they organise themselves, at which their films are rated by an audience.

The second chapter titled ‘Bridging a Gap: Answering the Questions of Crime, Youth Unemployment, and Poverty through Film Training in Benin, Nigeria’ is written by Osakue Stevenson Omoera. The first paragraph of this chapter sets out the serious issue of high unemployment in Nigeria, and states that ‘several intelligence reports on Nigeria indicate that if the country is unable to create about 24 million jobs by 2015, it could become a failed state’. It adds that after fifty years of independence unemployment has risen from 15 percent to over 60 percent. This chapter goes on to explores how film education can encourage young people to channel their energy into productive ventures and focuses in particular on Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry. It argues that there is a greater need in Nigeria for practice-based film education in production.
centres than for formal universities and film schools. From my experience of training and working with young people who are trying to get into the film industry, I would suggest that this is a global problem facing graduates who would like to pursue a career in the creative industries after graduation.

Chapter Three, by Rod Stoneman, discusses three personal examples to illustrate aspects of the global dynamic between cultures. Stoneman highlights the importance of critical reflection and wider viewing of films as a key component in learning how meaning is derived, and how students can bring their ideas to practical filmmaking. He draws upon his experience while working on an EU project in Marrakech and on the Med Film Factory, which offered training expertise from the West to support indigenous forms of filmmaking.

Part Two on the Middle-East focuses on three research papers on film education from three countries, each with a very different story to tell. The first chapter in this section, by Hamid Naficy, is set against the background of the ‘internationalisation’ of higher education in the Persian Gulf, which has seen many American and European universities establish campuses there over in recent years. The chapter particularly focuses on Northwestern University’s third campus in Doha, Qatar (NU-Q), with the other two located in Evanston and Chicago. Naficy begins by discussing two forms of internationalisation: students who go North to study in American and European universities; and the transplanting of western universities to the oil-rich Persian Gulf. For example, the multi-billion dollar Education City, funded by the Qatar Foundation, has transported specific courses from the top universities in America to Qatar.

The education programme for film and media production was seen by Persian Gulf autocrats as a way ‘to construct both new and national narratives of modernity and to create a modern imagined nation’. Nacify goes on to outline his own personal experience of teaching at NU-Q, which posed challenges for the faculty due to the diverse cultural orientation of a conservative and quote tribal society. There were also issues with censorship which impacted on the film viewing sessions. However, the course that he taught included Middle-
Eastern and African cinema and incorporated visits from local filmmakers based in Qatar.

In sharp contrast to the very well resourced education programme in Qatar, though with the common theme of film education for women, is the situation in Palestine by Alia Arasoughly which is set in the post-Oslo years, after the formation of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arasoughly outlines the history of film education in Palestine, and focuses on the non-governmental organisation Shashat, licensed by the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Culture, in which she played a central role. There are many challenges to film education in Palestine, especially personal safety issues while delivering in a region in conflict. Shashat focuses on women’s cinema and the social and cultural implications of the representation of women, and aims to build the capacity of Palestinian women filmmakers. Its other aim is to reach under-represented communities and established partnerships with nine Palestinian universities. Shashat’s work includes: an annual women’s film festival which is the largest of its kind in the Arab world; a screening and discussion programme; and cultural outreach programmes. The areas of capacity-building such as professional workshops, panel discussions, promotion of Palestinian film and networking with the regional and international film community, are good examples of the benefits resulting from collaboration with film festivals. Shashat has also offered practical film training to university students, as women students were more hesitant about using film equipment than their male counterparts.

Chapter Six by Mette Hjort focuses in more detail on the benefits of networks and collaboration based on the work of the National Film School of Denmark’s Middle-East Project, which is a transnational documentary filmmaking training initiative that began in 2006. Danish students were sent to film in the Middle East, and this then extended to inviting students from the Middle East to collaborate on film projects in Denmark. The students gained invaluable life experience from filmmaking abroad and Hjort concludes that ‘this kind of film pedagogy is liberating, engaging and enabling’, and can help develop networks for future filmmaking activities. Parts One and Two make repeated reference to the problem of the ‘brain drain’ of film studies graduates from the global South. Many film graduates from the South are forced to move
abroad to find work in the more prosperous film industry in the North. This will continue unless more is done to support indigenous film industries which could provide employment opportunities in the future.

Part Three is dedicated to the Americas and begins with Chapter Seven, written by Toby Miller under the interesting title ‘Goodbye to Film School’ in which he discusses the reasons why film schools are not suitable in their current form. He suggests that media and cultural studies (or critical studies/cinema and media studies) should replace these courses. He poses the question of ‘how film schools can be transformed to counter sexism, militarism, and exploitation ... a new humanities field contra business studies?’ Chapter Eight, written by Scott MacKenzie, moves further north to Canada, and describes a film training process at the ‘Independent Imaging Retreat’ founded by experimental filmmaker Philip Hoffman, whose work is inspired by the Beats. The background to the Canadian film industry is explained, and the important role that the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) has played in supporting filmmaking for over the last forty years, especially in the area of documentary, experimental and animation. The NFBC has also given support in filmmaking and production funds to marginalised groups, and so gives everyone opportunities to engage with filmmaking. He goes on then to outline a fascinating initiative called ‘The Imaging Retreat’ created as a response to the cutbacks in film education for filmmakers regionally, and the increasing commercialisation of film production. Miller goes on to outline the programme which has a ‘Film Farm’ manifesto, enabling students and professional filmmakers to collaborate and go back to basics, using 16mm and Super 8 film stock, even developing their own film in dark rooms.

Chapter Ten, written by Christopher Meir, goes on to look at film education at the University of the West Indies (UWI) and begins his paper by stating that the Anglophone Caribbean is very much behind in terms of cinema development, as compared with the rest of the Caribbean. UWI has three campuses, the flagship University is in Jamaica, a second in Barbados, as well as St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago. The curricula is as wide as possible for the BA Hons course, as the students will receive training in as many aspects of filmmaking as possible, thereby improving their prospects of working in the industry after graduating. Again we see a very successful example of filmmaking
collaboration resulting from the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival. The St. Augustine campus provides space for workshops and screenings, giving students a greater opportunity to attend events with an international focus, such as visiting filmmaker master-classes and screenings that they would normally not have access to. Meir also outlines the importance of keeping up with new technologies and how this achieved.

Chapter Eleven is the only paper that focuses entirely on younger learners inside and outside the classroom, an area that I have worked in as a practitioner for many years. This paper by Armida de la Garza sets out the background and aims of the *Comunicacion Comunitaria* in Mexico city which teaches video production to disadvantaged children aged 8-13 years, with the aim of promoting human rights and preserving cultural identity. The paper details an initiative called Magical Little Hands, a series of videos using cut-out animation, and goes on to explain in detail how animation was used effectively on a number of youth film projects. It also describes an initiative called Matatena AC, which was inspired by a trip to Montreal by its founder, who was introduced to the International Centre of Films for Children and Youth, again showing the importance of international collaboration and sharing of good practice. The aim was to broaden children’s access to a wider range of films other than the dominant cinema of Hollywood. There had up to this point been no film policy for young people in Mexico City.

The chapter describes the content and structure of film workshops with detailed lesson plans which would be useful for teachers across many areas of the curriculum. This type of filmmaking project with young people, in my own experience, has considerably increased participants’ self confidence and self esteem. It also instils invaluable life skills of working together as a team by have allowing participants to share the ultimate goal of finishing a good short film that they can be proud of. This chapter ends with details of another innovative called *Juguemos a Grabar*, open to 8-15 year olds, which is more vocational and covers all roles needed for both animation and documentary films and are trained in a wide range of skills which would be useful in the world of work. This section demonstrates how filmmaking and film production skills can contribute to the local economy.
The final chapter, by George Yudice, highlights two project areas. The first concerns the favelas (often translated in English as ‘ghettos’), marginalised groups that do not have state provided services and the middle-class youth who produce what Yudice refers to as ‘fringe’ cinema. Yudice explores new Latin American cinema and uses the film City of God as an example of cinema that does not glamorise violence in the favelas, unlike some of the more mainstream Brazilian productions. He then goes on to outline the educational project of the Free Cinema School, where students have normal school lessons in the morning and film production classes in the afternoon. The process includes going on visits outside the classroom to explore the city, which have been found to enrich their filmmaking output. Yudice demonstrates how there has been a shift from formal film schools due to new digital technologies which have created different ways of learning about filmmaking, and even distributing film, with the poorest now having access to a wide range of audio visual technologies.

The case studies in this publication highlight the importance of critical skills development and experiences abroad for film students, which ultimately contributed to their personal development, as well as to the quality of their work. The case studies also demonstrate how partnerships are beneficial for film schools and their students, and of course their partner organisations such as film festivals, community groups and funders. This volume includes examples of collaboration such as working with local communities, the national and international creative industries, and film festivals; all of which impact positively on the wider community and, ultimately, on the socio-economic development of the countries in question. This is a very useful publication for course designers of film schools, teachers of primary and post primary schools, outreach programme film project co-ordinators and film festivals, as well as policy-makers, who will be able to gain an insight into global organisations working in film education that demonstrate good practice.

It would be useful and interesting to monitor the progress and work of former students and project participants. Such studies would be very useful in further demonstrating the positive impact and tangible outcomes of the training that students have received. If, in the long term, these projects improve employment prospects due to the new technical skills that film students acquire, policy-makers may be more inclined to offer more funding to develop this area.
of training. This in turn should be accessible to everyone and provide financial support or incentives for more film production apprenticeships to be made available to the filmmaking talents of the future.

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