**‘Where Next? Envisioning a Layered and Cohesive Future for Academic/Industry Media**

**Projects – Neil Fox**

**Apologies**

**Early Career Researcher**

**Writer/Producer/Educational Coordinator**

1min

**The Project**

I developed the School of Film & Television Filmmaker in Residence pilot out of a desire to integrate my personal filmmaking, my research and my teaching and from a belief that modern universities teaching film could and should be engaged in micro-budget feature film production. At Falmouth University’s School of Film & Television there is a history of supporting local to Cornwall independent feature films with funding that was ostensibly offset by students undertaking work experience or internships on the production. However, this pilot project was envisioned as showcasing how a film school or university film department could fund, or co-fund in partnership the production of a commercial, professional feature film that utilised students in the crew but was not a student or university film.

I am using the terms commercial and professional to denote the intentions of the work, to place it outside an educational context, rather than to suggest that selling the work, or paying filmmakers a ‘going rate’ are predominant factors. Both paying professionals and getting the work seen were and are considerations of the project but the first aim was to find a way to create a model for aspiring professional feature filmmakers to tap into, that had pedagogic and partnership impact for the film school.

From a germ of an idea while doing my doctorate, to the trust placed in me to do it in May 2015 I wrote, produced and acted as educational coordinator for a feature film that was also an in depth teaching project.

‘Wilderness’ is my first feature film, following a number of short films, and was written with this project in mind. In terms of my personal creative ambitions I wanted to write and make something that, in the words of Michael Gillespie, would be a

(Slide)

Once I was given the go-ahead to pitch the plan I set about working out when it could be filmed, how many students could be utilised, how many professional crew could be employed and how much they would be paid, how much money there was for cast etc. I also worked out what support and resources could be available in kind and how the funding could cover a small final stage pre-production window and 10-12 day shoot window. I used my Film course coordinator responsibility as head of our guest lecture programme to work out visits throughout the year of development leading up to the shoot, that would be funded from a separate pot, the guest lecture and masterclass pot.

The original figure I quoted in preliminary discussions quickly changed as I realised the cost of feeding, transporting and housing everyone involved. I also realised how much I had forgotten about filmmaking in the years doing my doctorate and not being active in my filmmaking practice. A higher amount of funding was agreed – as you can imagine it still wasn’t enough. More on that later – and the parameters of a shoot were laid out. With that in mind I set about writing a feature film, setting myself a similar number of creative restrictions to the construction of the script – set amount of page numbers and ‘scenes’, amount of characters. The last one was the only one that was guided slightly by real budgetary concerns. I knew the financial limitations but tried not to let them get in the way of writing something that I was proud of, that was a story I wanted to tell.

**Trailer – 2mins**

**BTS – 5mins**

**Creative**

So, to clarify, the creative ambitions for the project were to create a model for micro-budget filmmaking that aspiring feature filmmakers could tap into – gaining access to budget, equipment and resources, and crew. In terms of the kind of filmmakers I believe will value such an opportunity I think filmmakers struggling in development having had success with short films or other content or writer/directors working in television, commercials or other media content creation looking for a way to realise a feature film or writer/directors from different gender, ethnic or economic backgrounds struggling still to find ways of accessing meaningful production opportunities, will be interested. This is informed largely through experience as a filmmaker, researcher and independent film festival director and programmer.

I also thought it would be valuable for my students to see me as a filmmaker in real terms, not just through watching my work, but watching me work. Having taken time to do a doctorate, and teaching film practice and theory as my day job, and having brought numerous guest speakers to the course who iterated what I was teaching but having greater impact due to ‘perceived professionalism’, I thought that my teaching would carry more weight if the students could see me create a feature film from scratch, follow the whole process, see the outcome.

(Quotes from Doctorate)

The dichotomy between theory and practice is rife within the industry itself [and] within teaching institutions staff can unwittingly support this dichotomy [practical tutors] are not adverse to light-hearted suggestions that [academic staff] who have never made a film are not qualified to comment on them.

McLuskie explains that this must filter down to the students who often identify more fully with the practical side of the course because of the often professional industry background of practical tutors who are ‘understood to be professionals who just happen to be teaching, an identity that is cultivated by the tutors themselves [who often] have a dismissive attitude towards education’ (2000: 106).

Stoneman (2014: 219) writes that ‘the dichotomy between the ‘academic’ and the ‘creative’ [...] is not just a matter of ephemeral language or broad linguistic categories; it is fundamental to our ways of understanding intellectual and creative activity and serves to construct individual and institutional formations throughout our lives’. Winston (2014) – teacher at the NFTS and NYU – regarding this tension:

The practitioners pour scorn on the scholars and hold their analyses to be incomprehensible irrelevances. The academy barely tolerates practitioners and thinks their more abstract musings are inadequate inanities (in Petrie and Stoneman, 2014: 07)

The film is produced by Baracoa Pictures, my production company and SoFT. SoFT have been great at sending the film out as a professional independent film, rather than a film school film. Their name appears at the end of the credits and we’ve downplayed the education angle at this stage. The idea being that the work should stand on its own and despite being co-owned by the two production companies the agreement regarding ROI is fair and the university can only use the film without Baracoa permission in specific ways – recruitment, open days etc.

(Cinequest Laurels)

So far, in terms of creative results, the film is having a festival run at the moment. Not as many festivals as we’d like but we know we’ve made something that is raw, uncomfortable, messy and influenced by cinema that isn’t that fashionable at present and without ‘name’ actors or the backing of a BFI or Creative England, will struggle to get impact above a certain level of festival. In the places it has played, the response has been great – a strong world premiere, and a recent awards success at the British Independent Film Festival. We also picked up a good review from The New Statesman’s Ryan Gilbey. The plan is to try and get into some more festivals, then do a UK cinema tour in collaboration with other universities. I have a number of contacts at both cinemas and universities so hope this ‘tour’ will see the film garner some more traction, that may lead to some kind of sale at some point. Having seen the film in an early cut the film school pledged further funding to putting the film on to the festival circuit and covering my costs to attend in the same way they do for academic conferences and symposiums. It’s kind of remarkable and unique being a filmmaker who has made a feature film where there is no pressure on getting a sale to repay investors or pay off personal debt. Hopefully that won’t make me complacent.

**Commercial**

The reason there’s a lack of pressure on the sale of the film is that the university’s ambitions institutionally are on the pedagogical possibilities and also the recruitment and marketing potential of having such a practice ongoing in the school. Eventually, and as the contract stipulates, the university would like films to be made that get sold so that investment can be recouped to put into future productions. However, they see the greatest possibilities for the project in bringing regular, professional level independent feature filmmaking into the school, further bolstering our reputation and excellent links with industry and industry professionals. They also see it as a great recruitment and marketing tool and believe the financial outlay, with these things in mind, is worth it, hopefully on an ongoing basis.

Having delivered a feature film for the agreed budget - plus personal financial and in-kind investment on behalf of Baracoa Pictures – on time, we shot the film in 11 days over Easter break 2016 – it is now out of my hands as the school seeks to recruit new filmmakers in residence using the success of ‘Wilderness’ as collateral. My concern is that the brilliantly hands off approach the school took during writing and production has been repeated in terms of understanding how the project was managed and delivered. The realities of how we did it, having 4 professionals – director/producer, editor, sound recordist, writer/producer plus student crew who had never been on a film set before shoot a feature in 11 days, have never been fully discussed or debriefed. This is a very specific type of production model with a number of hidden issues that not every filmmaker will be up for, but every filmmaker should be aware of. That however is above my pay grade so I am promoting my film and developing research outputs like this from it.

**Pedagogic**

My pedagogic aims for the project were varied. I wanted to give students access to a professional on-set experience where they could fail, make mistakes, learn cultures and hierarchies safely – without getting yelled at or fired. First and Second Year undergraduates from film, television and animation were invited, as were MA students. Third year undergraduates were not, much to their consternation, but I felt that a month – part time pre-production and 2 weeks full time pre-production and shoot time – was too much time away from their final assessment, which would have been due a week after we returned from the shoot at the end of Easter break. Also, I felt that first and second year undergraduates could then bring what they had learned on the shoot into their film school assessments, hopefully increasing the professionalism of shoots and the quality of work created. I also believed that the process of applying and being interviewed to work on the film would benefit them in similar ways. The attached aims of developing better informed graduates and helping give students the confidence to be independent filmmakers as opposed to following traditional mainstream routes to production will take a while to be realised and in reality are difficult to define in metrics the institution relies upon.

One way the project really helped me was in how it reframed my understanding of what I was teaching. I teach theory, practice and most importantly to me, the theory of practice. However being back in the midst of a production and then on set made me realise how much of filmmaking can’t be taught in a classroom or workshop because it’s problem solving and it’s not theoretical problem solving but solving a specific problem in a specific way based on time, cost, achievability, need, and a million other things. It made me think how I talk about the process of filmmaking, about production, about problem solving and approaches to getting a film made that I believe improved the quality of work made in the academic year that followed Wilderness’s production. I made fewer naïve assumptions about what students might and should know at that point in their development because I had gone through the madness of production and made lots of mistakes and re-learned lots of lessons despite having more ‘experience’.

1 MA student and 23 undergradate film and television students were involved the in the production, and post-production, with a further 6 animation students involved in VFX. Over half were female, which was a stipulation I put in place. First year undergraduates were engaged as production assistants. Second year undergraduates worked in the sound, camera, post-production and production office departments. The idea being that the camera, post-production and sound students who had recently completed modules in the school, could be put to work in more depth. They were responsible for elements such as logging, syncing, foley, boom operating, lens care, 2nd unit and lighting across the production. There was a script supervisor and many students helped out in the production design department – not a department really – just set dressing and props management on our direction – as well as clapper loading and looking after the cast.

**Interviews – 3 mins**

**Research**

I will finish by discussing an area I hope will lead us into a discussion. As mentioned at the outset I am still finding a way of talking about this project and want to see if peers and colleagues are experiencing or have experienced similar issues.

My institution are not putting the film forward for the REF because it doesn’t contain a research question and isn’t citable. They will consider outputs that emerge from the process so this, and a journal article that hopefully will follow. That’s fine in many ways, as I am both a filmmaker and academic researcher. However, my concern is that there is an increased demand on practitioners in institutions creating content that extends beyond the walls of academia and is more accessible, but any significant content takes an incredible amount of time, energy, resources to create and the creation of work that then needs to recreated, reframed and refocused to be acceptable in traditional academic terms will undoubtedly put further strain on already strained staff. How can we try and help the situation? How can we help each other frame our practice, find common language to present the work in traditional academic terms? How to frame practice that is narrative and ‘commercial’ so that it’s REF-able to best utilise the skills, time and endeavours of staff. And if this is already happening, how can we make those discussions more accessible and widely circulated.

In terms of framing the work, this has become more of an issue with my podcast, The Cinematologists. It has a listenership of 15-20,000, is delivered in partnership with another institution, features and disseminates the work of academics, filmmakers and critics and has corporate sponsorship from film streaming and exhibition service MUBI, plus partnership with Curzon Cinemas. Yet, because no one has cited content from it, it is not considered REF-able. Do colleagues face similar push back or is it just my institution? I hope we can talk about these and any other questions you might have about this project and my approaches, now.

Thanks for listening.