

A filmmaker in the classroom

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Introduction

Videomuseums is an audiovisual educational project which teaches 12-18 year-olds how to use the cinema as a means of expression to make a short documentary. The educational activities that I took part in as a filmmaker took place at the school over 10-12 three-hour sessions. During that time, I worked with a teacher, and our goal was for the students to acquire a basic knowledge of cinematographic terminology. Our main objective was to combine theory with practi-

cal tasks so that the students could apply what was being taught straight away. The students' participation in the Videomuseums project gave rise to a variety of conclusions about their relationship with audiovisual education, especially as regards the art of filmmaking. The following text is an attempt to describe those conclusions, and to show that audiovisual education is not merely useful but, actually, a basic need for contemporary communities.



Students during a video shooting, Marathonas, Athens 2012



Students during a video shooting, Pallini, Athens 2012

Filmmaking is teamwork

During the production of a film, the participants work together to realise a common vision. In the case of a documentary, as with Videomuseums, it is possible for a lot of children to take part in various stages of production: research, the collection of source material, the screenplay, direction, editing and so on. Each stage contains sub-categories, thus affording every participant the opportunity to choose the area which interests them, what suits them, and in what way they can be of use to the rest of the team. This fact was reinforced by the realisation which arose from personal observation during the process of allocating roles and duties. It was also confirmed in discussions with the teachers. They noticed that, during the course of the project, the students who stood out were those who had previously been on the periphery of the micro-community that makes up a school class. Filmmaking at school, as something new that broadens the students' horizons and presents new opportunities to get involved in public affairs, offers a great chance to those students who are outsiders to develop their skills and demonstrate their inclinations and interests. In this way, they find a role, often a leading one, which not only puts them on a par with their classmates, but also results in their inclusion in the other activities and everyday routines of school life.

Art as participation in society

The production of a short film by students taking part in the Videomuseums project not only reflects the culture and points of view of the creators, but also educates the children in terms of learning to decipher audiovisual "products". In this way, it also creates a shield against the barrage of images that surround us in today's society. Making a film helps young filmmakers discover and interpret the world and present their viewpoints and suggestions. Their film serves as an intervention in society: a way in which they can participate in communal matters. The students involve themselves in the world via a new and intriguing process, using a new language, the language of cinematography. Of course, the main aim of teaching students the terminology of the cinema and an aesthetic appreciation of it is not to turn them into professional filmmakers. The time limit imposed by the course specifications does not allow for a more in-depth look at film studies. Besides, that is the goal of a film school in further or higher education.

The cinematographer and the student as co-creators

It is important for an artist to have contact with students and to get involved in collaboration with them. The relationship that is formed as a result is beneficial for both parties, since

the filmmaker offers knowledge and experience whereas the students supply ideas, imagination and genuine reactions and feelings about the work, free from the pressures of commercial interests or other compromising factors.

The filmmaker who walks into a classroom to teach his craft must be professionally active; in other words, working in film or television. In that way, the filmmaker has the opportunity to share a more relevant and topical picture of the reality of media production. It is current examples, those easily recognised by today's students, and not ones from the past, which will allow the students and the cinematographer to reach their goals more quickly during their sessions. All this enables the filmmaker to speak of things that concern him directly and not be forced to dig up images, theories, practices and examples from the distant past.

The active and effective cinematographer has an awareness of his role in the classroom, which is not to replace the teacher; his work has a different set of objectives. Additionally, the students should recognise this role and behave accordingly. They shouldn't compare him to their teachers. This different way of viewing the cinematographer allows a collaborative relationship to develop between specialist and learner, professional and amateur. These types of relationship are necessarily different from the one that exists

between teacher and student. This unique relationship guarantees a healthy and harmonious collaboration during the making of a film, as was the case with the Videomuseums project. The students trust the filmmaker, seeking his advice and being able to carry out their work free of stress about exams or marks. They have the opportunity to create and express themselves freely, alongside an ally who can help them deal with practical matters and be by their side whenever he is needed.

A filmmaker's presence in the classroom takes on additional value thanks to his knowledge of technological advances in terms of image and sound. The active cinematographer regularly employs this technology, experiencing its development on a daily basis. For this reason, he is able to give direct and informative answers to relevant questions by students. Furthermore, the rapid rate of development in the field of audiovisual technology is especially exciting for today's young people. It means that a student film can be shot, edited and shown around the world more quickly and easily than ever before. Digital technology gives young filmmakers the capability to transform their abstract ideas into tangible results.

The cinematographer initiates students into the correct use of this technology, demystifying it and helping to make it



Students during a video shooting, Pallini, Athens 2012

a practical tool for artistic expression. Of course, the technology itself can be so overwhelmingly impressive to students that they need to be reminded that it shouldn't be viewed as anything more than a means to an end. What becomes most important during sessions with students, and especially during the making of the film is cooperation, the development of skills and the ability to create and communicate via the medium at hand. Moreover, the better students understand film as a medium, the more they prefer a simpler, more authentic approach to production rather than relying on the special effects so readily available in digital technology. This remains the case as long as the team feel a sense of ownership regarding their work. It's important that they utilise digital technology as necessary, but without becoming over-reliant on it. It is also important that the team is allowed to operate independently, without too much guidance from the cinematographer or teacher. In the end, what really stays with the students is the fact that they have created something on their own, from beginning to end.

The filmmaker and the teacher

Every film in the Videomuseums gives students the opportunity to work collectively, overcoming their differences in order to meet the creative challenge. The main goal for the schoolchildren participating in this project is for the students to tell their own story, to express their desires and convey their message to younger and older viewers alike. For this

to happen, the cinematographer and the educator have to work together, each respecting the boundaries of the other. As a general rule, the filmmaker cannot act as teacher and the teacher cannot act as filmmaker. Of course, during meetings, it is sometimes necessary for the filmmaker to do some of the things that the teacher might ordinarily do, just as it is possible for the teacher to have to assume some of the duties connected with the filmmaking project itself. For instance, there are times when he or she might have to carry out certain tasks, coordinate discussions and record relevant ideas and viewpoints. Despite this minor overlapping, the roles can and should be viewed as being discrete responsibilities. It is important for students to have a living example of effective cooperation between parties. This helps them get into the team spirit in order to undertake this collaborative project.

The documentary as a bridge for exchange

Making a documentary, however, specifically one for the Videomuseums project, has various other dimensions. As a genre, the documentary attempts to record the truth in a creative way. It aims to catch life "in the act" as the first filmmakers used to say. In other words, it enables the filmmaker to talk about matters that concern them, their needs and doubts, and whatever else they want, using real pictures. Documentary makers can present their views regarding the world around them and their role in it. The Videomuseums creators not only have the chance to make their own documentary; at the same time they come into contact with the



Teachers' training, voice-over recording workshop, Athens, 10/2010



Students' training, documentary workshop, Athens, 10/2011

films of their contemporaries from other countries. Moreover, the language of the cinema connects and becomes a bridge of communication between the youth of Greece and those of Germany. The immediacy of film, especially of documentary film, crosses whatever borders and whatever social and cultural differences exist, successfully facilitating communication and the exchange of ideas. With this exchange, the students realise that, however different the daily routine of a young person from Germany may be from that of a young person in Greece, they both have the same needs: the need to interpret the world, the need for communication, the need for love and acceptance. The role of the filmmaker in this process is to encourage students to highlight their issues and to help them to develop them using the cinema as a means of expression.

Conclusion

Communication and the cultivation of ties between people lay the foundations for making the world a better place. Art creates channels of communication and the cinema, especially, can widen these channels. The interaction set in motion by the Videomuseums project opens up similar channels, which should be kept open at all costs. They are based on such values as respect for differences and solidarity. Essentially, they represent the purpose of modern Europe: cross-cultural cooperation. The students/amateur filmmakers are ready to make truly great films, directed with truth and artistry – films that are the work of amateurs, in the literal sense. In other words, they are the work of people who are passionate about what they do and who pursue this passion

for satisfaction rather than for commercial purposes, as Robert Flaherty explained. Clearly, the filmmaker's contribution to the educational process goes beyond simple artistic activity. The students have a tool in their hands, and it is up to them whether they use it, not only to make the world better, but also to change it. Why shouldn't they?

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George Didimiotis was born on the island of Cythera and lives in Piraeus, Greece. He studied cinema and media in England. Since 1999, he has been working as a film director and editor in cinema productions. Since 2002, he has also been teaching directing and editing in schools, workshops and adult education seminars.