

Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman, *Educating Film-Makers: Past, Present and Future*, Bristol & Chicago: Intellect, 2014. ISBN 9781783201853. Paperback, 184 pages.

Practice-based film education faces a number of challenges. In the United Kingdom, the instrumentalism that besets the higher education sector is reinforced by the narrow focus of accrediting bodies, and an industry that would prefer graduates to be served up ‘oven ready’. Meanwhile the industry itself is subject to rapid and constant change due to technological developments that touch upon all aspects of production, distribution and exhibition, as well as economic and cultural shifts in an increasingly global environment. These new challenges lead to the reframing of old problems: What should we teach? How should we teach? How do we strike the right balance between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’?

This book sets out to intervene in this debate, in part through a historical examination of film education and its contribution to film culture and the film industry, and in part through a set of polemical ‘provocations’ addressing a number of key concerns for film education. It is arguably more successful in the former than the latter.

The authors set out their stall in opposition to the policies of the (now defunct) UK Film Council and Skillset which, they argue, fail to acknowledge the potential of film education to do more than deliver skilled technicians to industry, or to engage with the ‘social engagement, intellectual curiosity and personal expression’ that underpin film as a “culturally relevant art form’ (8). For Petrie and Stoneman these are essential components of film education, entirely compatible with the acquisition of craft skills and a professional understanding of industry. It is this underpinning belief that connects their distinct contributions to the book.

Duncan Petrie begins with succinct and engaging histories of film education in the United States and continental Europe. The political and cultural functions of national cinemas are key to understanding the latter, although Petrie is keen also to recognise the importance of cross-border influence and collaboration. State funded film schools, set up to serve state subsidised European cinemas, promoted cultural as well as technical understanding. From this model emerges the concept of the filmmaker as public intellectual and auteur, reinforced by the involvement of figures such as Eisenstein and Rossellini – although the author notes a movement latterly towards a more collaborative model of filmmaking.

US film education began from a very different premise, arising independently within universities, where filmmaking was frequently taught in tandem with film studies. A commercially successful industry, with an established apprenticeship system, had little interest in offering film school graduates a clear career path. There were benefits, however, in terms of academic and creative freedom. Standing apart from the mainstream, universities became a force for innovation, providing a transfusion of new blood to revive the declining industry of the late 1960s and 1970s. The success of the ‘Brat Pack’ (Scorsese, Coppola et al) can be ascribed to a combination of technical expertise and film scholarship. While contemporary US film departments enjoy greater industry recognition, Petrie suggests this comes at a price with a focus on craft specialisation displacing the development of ‘more personal all-round film-makers’ (77), and hollowing out the intellectual content from practice-based programmes to promote an uncritical relationship with industry.

The British experience is explored through four key institutions representing different philosophical approaches to film education that resonate with both earlier and contemporary models. The state funded National Film and Television School, established to support the UK industry, offered graduates a direct career route into industry. The London Film School, as a private provider, was forced to continually reinvent itself in response to shifting financial

imperatives. The Royal College of Art approached film as a visual, rather than a narrative, medium, emphasising experimentation over industrially determined craft skills. Screen Academy Scotland, meanwhile, was developed in the highly charged political context of devolution, a reminder of the cultural and economic significance of film – and thus of film education.

While Petrie situates these histories in relation to the British film industry and British funding policies, he neglects the broader social, political and cultural contexts within which film education debates have been played out, which arguably account for the tendency of the first three histories to mirror one another. In particular he overlooks key changes in educational policies and practices, barely acknowledging the impact of mass tertiary education. The author shows a limited awareness of the contribution of British universities to film education, even as their graduates become increasingly influential in the industry. Perhaps as a result he tends to discount the extent to which Skillset's accreditation process, for all its flaws, helped to address poor practices in the proliferating sector and to restore credibility to a discipline that was in danger of falling into disrepute.

Despite these limitations, what emerges from Petrie's histories is a strong, situated sense of the ways in which different educators at different times have approached the perennial issue of balance in film education. What is lacking is an explicitly analytical perspective, pulling together these diverse experiences to draw out the common themes and explore lessons for contemporary educators.

The reader who looks to the final section of the book to provide this analysis will be disappointed. Rod Stoneman promises insights into key debates founded on a unique blend of theoretical understanding with personal experience. In practice his essays are rendered almost impenetrable by a convoluted writing style and a rambling structure that obscures any coherent argument. Stoneman explicitly rejects the traditional academic essay as a format for his contribution, and there is no doubt that his personal experience brings colour to, for example, the history of Channel 4 commissioning practices, while his polemic brings some moments of brilliant clarity – such as his characterisation of the early contributors to *Screen* for whom 'the factors of gender or the configurations of class were always problems elsewhere' (275). However such gems are buried among a bric-a-brac of unsupported assertions, barely relevant tangents and self-indulgent anecdotes. Stoneman ranges over a wide range of topics, but at times displays a startling lack of engagement with current scholarship – as, for example, in the area of documentary and the ethics of representation – and current education practice. A more streamlined discussion, with a clear focus on the present and future challenges of film education, would have made this book an altogether more useful tool for those at the twenty-first century 'chalk face'.

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