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Reality Checks: How Film Schools are Adapting to Entertainment Industry Changes

Eephus

by Scott Macaulay
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Scan the entertainment business press and everywhere you'll see the phrase "the great contraction." The aftermath of COVID shutdowns, labor strikes, the wind-down of zero-interest-rate policies, the end of peak TV, changes in the competitive streaming landscape, the rise of TikTok—all have conspired to make the ever-perilous path toward a career in feature film and television even more uncertain.

The economic laws of supply and demand, as they pertain to the labor market, would indicate, then, that film schools must be feeling an enrollment pinch, but talking to various graduate and undergraduate chairs and professors from across the country, that's not the case. The top schools remain competitive, and incoming students—well, they want to direct.

"You poll the students," says Emerson College associate professor and chair of the Visual and Media Arts program Shaun Clarke, "and they're coming in because they're watching movies

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and TV shows, and they want to be writers, directors and showrunners making these movies and telling these stories."

Prashanth Kamalakanthan—a director, *Filmmaker* 25 New Face and assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, which reports record enrollment—concurs. "The COVID years kept people locked up and streaming stuff, so there's now a new generation," he says. "They have seen more films, they write on Letterboxd and their knowledge of global cinema is increasing. They apply into a cinema program at the age of 17 or 18, and they want to make, mostly, TV shows and movies. Especially as freshmen, they are like, 'This is what I love.'"

But if students aren't fretting over the laundry list of obstacles comprising this article's lede, faculty are, and amid all this change they are adjusting curricula to prepare students for the altered environments they'll encounter come graduation. Says program director and senior lecturer Sig Libowitz about curriculum changes made by the Johns Hopkins University Graduate Film & Media Program: "We want to help our students get a good, solid launch into their careers by providing the strong tools and craftsmanship that the modern film and media industry is looking for, such as advanced courses in editing, VR and sound, budget and scheduling, understanding IP and key entertainment law and contract issues. [We also want to provide] an honest understanding and acknowledgment of the changing film industry landscape in terms of how streaming platforms are impacting the financing, festival and distribution models, the opportunities and challenges that AI and virtual production bring to the table and how to prepare and present yourself as a 'professional' and gain your first, second and continuing jobs in the industry."

The most obvious curriculum adjustments across many schools involve adding courses in new technologies. In recent years, many schools—including Georgia State, Full Sail, USC, and Savannah College of Art and Design—have installed volumes, the giant LED walls enabling filmmakers to place actors within immersive, 3D environments. At NYU, two virtual production stages will open later this year at the Martin Scorsese Virtual Production Center in Industry City, and the school now offers a separate one-year MPS degree in virtual production.

In short, classes in virtual production are becoming widespread. At Johns Hopkins, for example, a first-year intro course, "Foundations of Immersive Storytelling," gets students "comfortable creating projects utilizing several tools they'll be using in more advanced classes, such as Unity, Unreal Engine, Blendr and 360 Camera techniques," reports Libowitz.

Emerson's video wall will go live in the fall, and Clarke says new faculty members have been hired to specifically teach virtual production and game design to "get students familiar with basic-level coding and being able to create within the video game environment."

The rise in virtual production and changing workflows are forcing schools to alter traditional production and post-production siloing. "Technology is advancing at light speed, and the difference between pre-production and post-production is collapsing," writes Jenn Ruff, head of post-production at NYU Tisch School of the Arts. “Students need to understand much more about the whole post process before they shoot, so we are trying to help them understand all of their technical choices while not losing sight of artistry. There are a zillion codecs and new cameras, and we try to balance learning as much as possible about them without getting overwhelmed and thinking that ‘the technology is your film.’”

An example of a curriculum reflecting this thinking is, says Ruff, the school’s post-production finishing class. Taught by colorist and video artist Natacha Ikoli, the class works in collaboration with a cinematography class taught by DP Frederick Elmes (*Blue Velvet*, *The Night Of*), “so students can understand seamlessly how their camera choices can be shaped and manipulated in post.”

AI remains a contentious topic in the entertainment business, with widespread fears that the technologies will lead to job elimination, but there’s also a sense among educators that students must be taught how to work with them in order to compete. The Animation Guild recently co-commissioned a study drawing on the input of 300 executives and managers and discovered that “Three-fourths (75 percent) of survey respondents indicated GenAI tools, software and/or models had supported the elimination, reduction or consolidation of jobs in their business division.” At the same time, however, “most executives and managers indicate GenAI has already led to the creation of new job titles and roles in their organization.”

Accordingly, new advanced classes at Johns Hopkins include ones on collaborating with AI, says Libowitz, while at Columbia University School of the Arts, says film chair and associate professor Jack Lechner, “We’ve continued to build up the offerings of our Digital Storytelling Lab,” referring to the “next-generation media lab” run by filmmaker Lance Weiler. Recently, Weiler and the Digital Storytelling Lab mounted what Lechner calls “a major masterclass on AI” involving leaders from the field where both students and faculty members formed teams “and had to develop movies with AI tools.”

But film school changes don’t just have to do with technology. For example, as the intimacy coordinator has become an accepted role on film sets, schools are adding presentations on the practice, incorporating them into student productions and, in the case of UK’s National Film and Television School, offering a part-time, six-month course leading to an NFTS certificate in intimacy coordination. Aimed at those with “experience in movement directing and teaching, choreography or directing,” the course includes instruction on choreographing scenes involving touch and kissing, implementing a closed set, BDSM scenes, working with VFX and green screens and birth scenes, among others.

Eco, or climate cinema, is a topic studied in many cinema studies courses, but it’s now appearing in production courses as well. Says Lechner, “This fall, we’re, for the first time, doing a course in collaboration with the [Columbia] Climate School on climate storytelling, which [producer] Lydia Dean Pilcher is teaching. It’s a class for film students, climate students and students from elsewhere in the university, and it will look at how you can tell stories that address climate change and think about them in ways that make them meaningful, relevant and entertaining, and not just medicine that you have to swallow."

Common across conversations with chairs and professors is an acknowledgment that, increasingly, media careers these days require hybrid skills. Says Richard Gladstein, executive director at Brooklyn College's Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema, "Our industry has hyphenates, you know? People who do multiple things." Feirstein is implementing a new curriculum beginning this fall, with students no longer enrolling into specific tracks, such as writer, producer or director. "Students are no longer choosing on their way in," Gladstein says. "They're choosing after a year-and-a-half if they want to focus on one area or another." For the first 18 months, students will learn from "more of a common curriculum" devoted to "the art and craft of cinema. Everyone will take a screenwriting class, a history of cinema class and a directing class," Gladstein says. "And all the while, everyone's going to be making movies because [Feirstein] is very hands-on."

"We acknowledge that the industry has expectations for the future that are more interdisciplinary," says Emerson's Clarke. Accordingly, "students in our programs don't declare concentrations or specialization," says producer Mike S. Ryan, associate professor at Emerson College. "Students are free to explore a range of disciplines—not just film but photography, new media, installation art and video game design and development—at any point in their time here."

Ryan and Clarke cite a number of Emerson graduates whose hybrid working methods have produced early success, such as the Oscar-winning Daniels. "They took traditional filmmaking classes and merged [their study] with animation and some of the new media courses and became After Effects gurus," notes Ryan. And Emerson graduates Tyler Taormina and Carson Lund from Omnes Films, who had *Christmas Eve in Miller's Point* and *Eephus* in Cannes this year, have built their production company around its members playing technical and producing roles across each other's features.

In Emerson's Visual and Media Arts Foundations course, says Ryan, "all the way through is the idea that the producer is a storyteller and needs to understand that their story can be implemented through various mediums."

Several of the educators we spoke to were conscious of the work samples students would take into the marketplace upon graduating. At NYU, Julia Solomonoff, chair of NYU Tisch's Graduate Film Department, cites as a change a new "tighter writing curriculum that ensures that our students not only leave the program with strong shorts but with a strong long-format script (feature film or TV pilot)." Explains Barbara Cigarroa, visiting professor in screenwriting at NYU Tisch, "By the end of the semester [in a second year course in feature-length film development], every student has developed a treatment or outline for a feature-length film, better preparing them to enter the third year ready to complete a full script for a feature-length film or a TV pilot. By the end of the third year, after a full year of writing workshops, students will have completed at least the first draft of their scripts."

Kamalakanthan highlights a change he calls "a smashing success" at VCU: "The final required core class used to be focused more on the industry—you know, understanding agencies, case studies of first features. That's now been spun off into more of an optional elective offering, and the course has been redesigned into a senior special projects course. We have a series of lectures, but it's really about life skills and understanding that to do filmmaking as a career, you not only have to be creative professionally, you have to be creative in the way that you structure your life. You have to think about time and long-term goals."

Accordingly, the class asks students to imagine three documents, films or research projects that will benefit them one to two years from now, "when they will likely be in a not-too-different position from where they are today—with skills and training and trying to make a career but without the institutional support [of film school]."

The resulting projects have run the gamut from the sort of enriching personal projects that students imagine they won't be able to make when career pressures dominate to extremely practical ones. Students have made documentaries about members of their families and their own personal lives. "One student compared New York, Atlanta and LA over the course of three weeks," says Kamalakanthan, "and each week she would do a presentation on their costs of living and the different types of productions that [shoot] there."

Educators say they are also taking in more feedback from students about their education, particularly when it comes to the kinds of guest speakers they'd like to learn from. At Feirstein, Richard Gladstein has brought in colleagues and generational peers, such as DP Janusz Kamiński and director Gus Van Sant, but he's now reaching out to filmmakers specifically requested. "You always want to have Steven Spielberg come in," says Gladstein. "He's undeniable. But when I asked students who they want me to bring in, they said Apitchatpong Weerasethakul, who gave a series of lectures to our students. And Terence Nance, Kelley Robins [Hicks] and Jamund Washington, who did *Random Acts of Flyness* for HBO, came in and were filmmakers in residence for several months."

Filmmakers like Nance, says Gladstein, are "a little closer to where [students] are," with work that's "a little more tangible to them, and it makes [film and TV making] seem slightly more achievable." Such a mindset is shared by Solomonoff, who says that at NYU, students "now need to graduate in four years." In the fourth year, she writes, recent grads participate in a mentorship program sharing with current students "'from the trenches' info. We try to bring in 'creative pods' like director Raven Jackson, producer Maria Altamirano and DP Jomo Fray to share how they went from the [short film] *Nettles* in school to [the feature] *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*; and director Max Walker-Silverman, DP Alfonso Herrera [Salcedo] and production designer Juliana Barreto [Barreto] on going from *Chuj Boys of Summer* to *A Love*

Song; and, of course, director Charlotte Wells and editor Blair McClendon on going from *Laps* to *Aftersun*. Other mentors have been [directors] Isabel Sandoval, Andrew Ahn, Savanah Leaf, Laura Terruso and Nikyatu Jusu."

Concludes Kamalakanthan, "If we're not just compounding already existing inequality and selling students a false dream, essentially scamming them and preying upon their artistic aspirations, we have to focus on transitioning them out of film education into the film industry and think about what that means in a sustainable, accessible way for increasingly diverse student bodies." He points out that VCU's enrollment is diverse, with many students from small towns in Virginia "who don't have a backstop of wealth, privilege, access and connections that can insulate you from some of the harsher economic factors and changes at play."

It's no secret that many students at the top-tier film schools do have this backstop, but these connections are simply not enough in today's changing environment. "The majority of students coming in say they want to be filmmakers," recaps Ryan, "and then might take a photography class, or installation art, or they're interested in emerging media, virtual production, VR or 360 filmmaking. One of these other strands of filmmaking clicks for them, and they end up pursuing a completely different trajectory than expected."

Whether those left turns replace the desire to make a feature film or simply become lucrative day jobs, filmmakers need to prepare for them alongside studying the film canon and writing three-act screenplays. Adds Ryan, "It's important for students to understand that very few directors in this country, aside from Spielberg and Scorsese, survive purely from filmmaking. Ridley Scott, after all, directs films as a hobby because he makes all his money from commercials and branded content."

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