

VGIK, Moscow

TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN FILM EDUCATION

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The debate between "the old" and "the new" is one of the permanent topics in the history of culture and art. In the XVIII century Voltaire observed that new ideas are not accepted immediately, by everyone and everywhere. His famous words, "All genres are good except dull ones" have become the motto in defense of artistic innovation. Nowadays, this theme is being developed further in connection with recent achievements in film and video technology, which have great influence on the creative process and its results.

Another important factor, upsetting the balance between tradition and innovation, derives from deliberate post-modernistic eclecticism. Post-modernism attempts to eliminate the distinction between different art forms and genres, between art and non-art, between the object and the subject, order and chaos, authorship and anonymity. It plays with the idea of "the free style", and style in the effacing of style. All this confirms the importance of the discussion of the role of tradition and innovation in both art and the film education at the beginning of the current century.

It is obvious that such notions as "freedom", "creativity", "originality", "ingenuity", and "novelty" are closely connected in art. As Kant pointed out, the main quality of "a genius", i.e. an artist, is originality. But nonsense can also be original. And real works of art, according to Kant, are exemplary. Another German philosopher, Hegel, regarded any crazy fancy (which dem-

onstrates freedom) higher than any natural phenomenon (which is subject to necessity). But he thought that a crazy fancy was a long way from art, because art's true objective was the recognition and incarnation of the highest truth, and the realization of one's spiritual needs. In the classical philosophical theories of the XIX century, originality and uniqueness could not be the main criteria of aesthetic value.

Bergson's teaching about the universal character of creative work realized in the universe, in one's mind and in art proved to be one of the most famous non-classical concepts of the relationship between conventionality and the non-conventional. This French philosopher looked upon art as the sphere of absolute freedom, the utmost expression of independence from the social and cultural tradition. Radical novelty and indeterminism are considered by Bergson as the criteria of aesthetic value. The philosopher claimed that the very idea of "possibility" made no sense with reference to creative work: the artist makes "the possible" and "the actual" at the same time on completion of his work. The artist's creation is proclaimed unique, and consequently aesthetically valuable regardless of its artistic quality. Even if a picture has none of the merits of the paintings of great masters, says Bergson, it is absolutely original and in this sense it is as unique as the works of Rembrandt or Velasquez. The philosopher stressed the innovative potential of cinema conditioned by its dynamism as opposed to the traditional static character of photography.

The innovative possibilities of film art do seem unlimited today. As Godard has wittily remarked, "everything is possible in films, but the main

thing is love". Once again we are convinced that diverse cinematic experiments need a moral foundation. One of the principal tasks of film education today in our opinion is the forming of a personality. We do not agree with the principle of the "tabula rasa" the meaning that a genius starts from zero, as a blank slate, rejecting tradition. Even when deviating from tradition, an artist cannot ignore it altogether.

The aspiring film artist must learn to make choices among an almost infinite array of alternatives, and this demands serious study of world culture, all art forms that existed before films and television, and, of course, profound knowledge of the 100 years of cinema history.

Old and new traditions interlace in film art, including those that already belong to the history of the last decade. Besides, the traditions themselves are quite diverse: there are traditions of conservatism and innovation, of making mainstream films and art films,

films about everyday life and films dealing with social and political issues. Emphasis may be put either on formal experiment or subtle psychologism.

Every generation of students is marked by the spirit of their time, by the spiritual, political and technological state of the society. The development of the teaching process therefore becomes increasingly complicated, and acquires new characteristics caused by the evolution of world cinema and national culture.

EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Nevertheless, our film school has certain relatively stable educational principles. When formulating the basics of training of actors, Sergei

Gerasimov, an actor and filmmaker who taught at VGIK for 40 years, used to say that it was easy to make an actor out of a person, but it was more difficult to make a person out of an actor. He was interested both in the person's moral quality, and his or her ability to transcend the limits of the player's profession and actively influence the society, alongside the screen-writer and film director.

WORKSHOPS

The usual form of teaching at VGIK is the system of "workshops" in which a group of students of one specialization meets under the guidance of a "master", an outstanding specialist in a certain area.

Addressing his students, Gerasimov warned them of the fact that the educational process was aimed at the free development of creativity. At the same time the instruction is greatly influenced by the teachers' personal and artistic experience, the masters' views on life, art and morals. That is why the students have to consider the faculty's requests and sometimes even obey their instructions, encouraging everything serious and humane and scorning everything that is superficial, borrowed, irresponsible and inhuman.

Today, as always, our workshops are led by leading film industry personalities who combine teaching with active work. It is obvious that there can be no uniformity of opinions and judgments. The aesthetic views, artistic criteria and methodological principles of our leading masters are quite different and sometimes even contradictory.

The diversity of creative individuality among the faculty and the students makes it difficult to separate clear-cut trends in the creative work of the young. Let us only remark that the themes, images, motives, subjects and stylistic devices of some student films and videos are later used in professional film and TV industry.

We will not linger on the obvious fact that free interpretation of artistic conceptions is more difficult in cinema than, say, in verbal art forms, because filmmaking is a production process determined by a complex combination of economic, political, technological and other factors.

We know from experience how hard it is sometimes for the students from different countries to find their ways of self-expression. The ways in which they strive for innovation is connected with the diversity of national traditions, the necessity to absorb the spiritual experience of their predecessors, to get practical skills of working in a crew, and to master modern equipment.

AN ORIGINAL FILM UNIVERSITY

The first innovative steps are taken at the entrance examination, and they are continued in the process of studies, right up to presentation of the final film. The aim of our film school is to professionally and morally prepare the student to realize his or her innovative ideas in film production, in a situation of severe competition, and the inevitable conflict of artistic, economic and political interests.

The idea of founding a film school in 1919, in the country that had barely survived the horrors of the Civil War, devastation, famine and cold was, undoubtedly the ultimate expression of romantic innovation. An article of the period underlined the fact that the aim of the film school was to train the vanguard of film industry creative staff – actors, directors, designers, composers, cameramen and projectionists – by means of rationally organized theoretical and practical classes. The big idea was in creating an original film university which would train a vast circle of specialists with one objective in view – making a film. According to the ideas of VGIK's founders, the film school was supposed to educate the creators of the unprecedented art of the future.

It is important to note that initially the film school was sited in the building of Studio One of the Moscow Art Theatre. Its leading figures – Konstantin Stanislavsky, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Vsevolod Meyerhold – attended student stage productions featuring Vsevolod Pudovkin, Boris Barnet, Alexandra Khokhlova and others. The avant-gardism of the young filmmakers emerged in the context of the artistic experiments which later became classics of the XX century.

Our Institute has always striven teaching its students in the best tra-

ditions of Russian humane culture. Beside professional subjects, the curriculum includes Philosophy, History and Theory of World Culture, Aesthetics, World History (including History of Religion), Economics, Psychology, Russian and World Literature, History of Theatre, Art, Photography, Theory of Music. This intrinsically university training is focused on teaching truly well-educated people. It is especially important considering the very unequal standard of education of young people coming from various parts of this country not to mention our foreign students.

Special attention is paid to tutorials. One of the general principles of our work is a comprehensive professional training aimed at forming the habits of team-work in creating artistic projects of the student's choice.

PRACTICE

Practical training at VGIK's Student Film Studio and apprenticeship at professional studios helps the students to become acquainted with contemporary methods of film production and to learn the tools of the trade. There are over 100 people of technical and administrative staff at the Student Film Studio. We have four big sound stages of 1000 square meters total area, two small sound stages, cutting rooms, departments of animation, computer graphics, sound recording, eight film and three video projection rooms, a lot of film and video shooting equipment, etc.

A student director is supposed to make 3 films during the period of his studies, totalling 40 minutes running time; a future camera person has to shoot 2 or 3 times more.

VGIK's Film Library, established in 1931 and recognized by the late Henri Langlois of the *Cinematèque Française* as the world's first collection of films of unique importance, is constantly replenished. On the whole, our graduates get sufficient training for entering the life of contemporary film and TV industries.

The interconnected processes of differentiation and integration of different specialisations has been gaining strength at VGIK in the last few years. We teach professions sometimes quite particular and new to our Institute,

such as computer graphics, animation directing, sound design, TV directing, and producing. Alongside our regular teaching programs we have introduced individual programs of different content, duration and qualification level, from short courses to a full-length Doctor of Art degree program.

These general principles are combined with specific standards for each department. In the Film Directing Department special attention is paid to conception, psychological insight, action, ambience, montage, individual style, the use of new technologies, the visual and sound aspect of a short film, fiction, documentary, educational or animation.

MONTAGE

Lev Kuleshov, VGIK's former rector, argued that unlike drama or literature, cinema was a plastic art form and gained its true meaning through montage.

The great film director and scholar Sergei Eisenstein, who taught at VGIK, stressed the importance of close contact between cinema and other art forms, as well as among cinema and psychology and sociology. In his exploration of montage, he discovered that the collision of two frames created some new images in the spectator's mind leading to a certain ideological understanding of what was seen in the screen. He looked upon montage as equivalent to the metaphoric poetic imagery, to the whole that was more than just the sum of its parts. His absorption with montage, combined with the acuteness of the ideological demands on art in the 1920s resulted in his developing the theory of "intellectual cinema" according to which montage junctures lead the audience to the understanding of abstract notions. Nevertheless, he considered the aesthetic synthesis of the image's form and content one of the main criteria of the film's value.

Arguing with the founding fathers, Andrei Tarkovsky worked out his own theory of auteur film. He laid great emphasis on the emotions outside formal logic, the inner structure of the film, the personal point of view, in a word, the filmmaker's aesthetic philosophy, and not the interaction with other film specializations. He

used to say that it was better to see a film once than to hear the screenplay a hundred times. Tarkovsky understood cinema as recorded time, as the matrix of real time, synonymous with the images of life itself. He tended to compare cinema with music, noting that in music, matter disappears, but film, in contrast, is the embodiment of the unity of time and matter.

According to Tarkovsky, film art is an occupation rather more moral than professional. For him, it was time for the cinema to solve the problems posed to mankind by history itself. Like Kant, Art, he presumed tended to the ideal, and its mission was to give hope and faith. The darker the world on the screen, the stronger should be the feeling of the ideal underlying the author's aesthetic conception, and the clearer should be the path to reach unusual spiritual heights. If the cinema gives the audience hope, there is the possibility of the catharsis, and moral rebirth. A truly artistic film image reflects the beholder's way to the truth and not the isolated little world of a self-centered filmmaker.

Such a moral position of the filmmaker is expressed in the aspiration for sincerity, for the unlimited natural verisimilitude of all the film's components, including its visual structure, acting, montage, etc. Tarkovsky insisted on the absolute "naturalness" of cinema not in the sense of literary naturalism of Zola and his school, but in the figurative forms of modern cinema, as perceived by the audience. The lack of freedom in the actor's realistic behavior leads to false symbolism, leaving the audience disappointed.

According to Tarkovsky the essence of cinema is correlating the human being with the infinite, with the universe. Striving for such a lofty aim, cinema acquires an innovative character connected with the freedom of artistic choice.

It was in this context that Tarkovsky considered the aesthetic problems of film editing. Its idea, he presumed, was in the rhythmic organization representing the intensity of the action and not just in pasting together separate sequences. (Criticizing the scene of the battle on Lake Chudskoye in Eisenstein's "Alexander Nevsky" for the cross-cutting of very short frag-

ments he compared it with bottling Niagara Falls). He was interested in the spectator's immediate reaction, and not in the decoding montage, comparisons and symbols. Tarkovsky identified creative work with the violation of professional laws, along the lines of Godard or Picasso.

Aleksandr Sokurov does completely without montage in his latest picture "Russian Arc".

Given the diversity of existing opinions it is a very difficult task to conceptualize the criteria of tradition and innovation in filmmaking. Marlen Khutsyev, Vadim Abdrashitov, and other masters think that the most important thing is to learn the fundamentals that lead to the mastering of a cinematic language comprehensible to the audience.

ACTORS

The training of actors is based on the traditions of Russian psychological school. The initial phase of teaching is devoted to eliminating the tension so as to let the students gain the inner and outer freedom of self-expression. Beginning with short sketches, the students eventually mount a full-scale theatrical production at the end of their studies. Their work is evaluated in terms of psychology, improvisation, inner mobility, the expressiveness of stage speech and stage movement, the ability to wear costumes, to put on make-up, and to dance.

SCREENWRITERS

"Notes of the Last Screenwriter" is the title of the book by Anatoli Grebnev, one of the patriarchs of the profession. He wonders whether screenwriters are disappearing, like steam engine drivers did some time ago. Producers' pressure on the one hand, and happening-style improvisation on the other are the realities of our day. Screenwriters proceed from the specific character of their profession, retaining the best qualities of the literary text. Collections of screenplays are published regularly. The evaluation criteria recognize that a superior screenplay is devoid of false theatricality, and depends on the concept, the plot, the characters, the action, the dialogue, and the mood.

DESIGNERS

Graduates of VGIK's Designers' Department often beat painters and graphic artist from other art schools at exhibitions and professional competitions. This may be caused by the fact that beside landscapes and work with models, our students are taught to think in terms of films, to cooperate with screenwriters, directors and cameramen. Along with traditional principles of painting, they are concerned with the unity of the script, the image, the cinematic movement, composition, set construction, light, etc. Animators face specific challenges which require mastering drawn and computer animation.

EVALUATION

Every student film is evaluated formatively, when it is in progress and summatively, when it is completed. We try not to discourage the students who are just beginning their professional life but at the same time self-criticism is welcomed. The most common difficulties in our student films are connected with triteness, absence of a personal outlook, ignorance of real life, escapism and abstraction, concentration on separate scenes to the detriment of the film as a whole, bad casting and lack of any concern about the potential audience.

The methods of the evaluation of students' work from the point of view of tradition and innovation need improvement, and their subjective character should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, on the whole they suit VGIK's main objectives: to create the conditions for developing the talent of the young filmmaker, to stimulate his or her originality, imagination, intuition, emotional memory, openness to everything new, and aesthetic taste.

VGIK'S 85TH ANNIVERSARY

This year VGIK is marking its 85th anniversary. Today Russia is undergoing another difficult period, and the funds allocated to culture and education are very scarce. But, as before, we think about the future, about the multinational cinema of the XXI century. The members of the new cinema vanguard should say their word about our epoch, the destiny of civilization, the meaning

of human sufferings, the necessity of friendship among people and nations.

In the years of its existence VGIK has trained over 1500 specialists for 90 countries of the world. This practice continues. I am sure that in spite of the difference of the conditions in the film schools of other countries we have many problems and approaches to their solution in common. VGIK has always been and is still open for cooperation. I think that by creative contacts we can make innovations on a solid cultural basis for the sake of the future progress of film and TV education and film art.

Regarding the interrelationship between innovation and tradition I would like to agree with those who think that we should take from the past not its ashes but its fire, the fire of creation.

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