Film Education Journal

FILM EDUCATION JOURNAL

UCLPRESS

Editorial

‘Educating independent film-makers’ – Special issue of the *Film Education Journal*

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Publication date: 13 June 2024

How to cite
Nunn, C. (2024) ‘“Educating independent film-makers” – Special issue of the *Film Education Journal*’. *Film Education Journal*, 7 (1), 1–4. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/FEJ.07.1.01.

Editorial review
This article has been through editorial review.

The motivation for this special issue of the *Film Education Journal* arose from a revalidation event for the BA in Filmmaking at Raindance Film School, an educational offshoot of the long-running UK film festival. Rachel Carter (one of the co-editors of this special issue) was hosting the event for her institution, De Montfort University Leicester (Raindance’s validating academic partner), while I served as an external panel member.

As the day progressed, student comments took their usual turn towards a focus on kit and resources. While such concerns are relatively common on practice-based film programmes, here they were met with some concern by the other De Montfort staff members. The focus of the matter, according to Elliot Grove (who founded Raindance, the British Independent Film Awards, and now this school) was that Raindance sought to teach students to be independent film-makers, and that this did not necessarily require the most up-to-date film-making kit. Indeed, it was discussed how film-making courses all too regularly make the kit and facilities their *raison d’être*, a trend arguably exemplified nowhere better than at the UK’s prestigious National Film and Television School (NFTS), alongside many UK undergraduate courses. Perhaps, Elliot, Rachel and I pondered, the Raindance Film School might reclaim that independent film-making spirit, which is under-represented at best in mainstream educational offerings across the United Kingdom.

But what does this education look like elsewhere, and at other educational levels than university? While Rachel and I both had a relatively informed understanding of offerings within a UK context, what

about practices and pedagogies further afield? While this issue (co-edited with Dr Rachel Wilson) has – following the direction of its submissions – ended up focusing on the UK, two further articles which were written in response to it will appear in the next issue of the journal. These articles, from South Africa and China, will be of import and interest to those reading this issue.

Before prefacing the contributions featured in this special issue, it is worth first seeking to provide a degree of context regarding the UK film and television industries and, indeed, the ways in which this sector has changed in the very short time between our initial call for papers (April 2023) and the publication of this issue in June 2024. Arguably, the discourse around educational offerings, at least here in the UK, has become stale over the past decade or so. 'Why study film-making?', students and their parents ask. The response from educators seems, routinely, to have become 'Because there are *jobs* in it.' This again presents a marked shift in discourse: to my father's chagrin, no one made this argument when I started an undergraduate degree in Digital Film Production at London South Bank University in 2006 at the tipping point of a global financial crisis and subsequent recession. Upon graduating in 2009, very few jobs whatsoever were available, let alone in film and television production.

All that was to change as 'the creative industries' – a concept pioneered by Tony Blair's New Labour government – were to become, according to Mould (2018: 11), 'a phenomenal economic success. [They] began to be championed as the UK's flagship sector. In 2016 they were estimated to be worth £84.1 bn to the UK economy, and employed around 2 million people.' According to the British Film Institute (BFI, 2021), film and high-end television production accounted for £4.1 bn in 2019, and employed around 218,000 people. As higher education became increasingly linked to future careers, and career-wide individual earning potential, film practice educators could rest easy at night because *there were jobs* in a booming industry.

However, such a situation masked a whole range of issues, many of which have emerged in more contemporary discourses. Beyond academic critiques, it seems that those in charge of film policy, and the ways in which such policies should be applied in educational settings, gave little thought to the quality of jobs on offer (Graeber, 2018; Percival, 2023; Van Raalte et al., 2023), who was getting them (Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, 2023; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Stephenson, 2024) or, indeed, who was able to maintain them (Van Raalte and Wallis, 2020; Van Raalte et al, 2024; Wallis, 2021). While reports on issues of diversity and inclusivity are regularly published, in terms of on-the-ground actionable changes, many of these same reports seem to indicate that, despite efforts, we may in fact be going backwards (Creative Diversity Network, 2022; Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, 2023). As the UK-based Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre's (2023: 47) report *The State of Creativity* attests, 'high-profile campaigns against sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination within [the creative industries, including film], coupled with academic research, have established that these industries have serious institutional and workforce problems. In short, they are neither inclusive nor diverse.' Such reports are commissioned by leading institutions such as the British Film Institute (BFI) and ScreenSkills, and by regional film bodies such as Film London, where, as recently as March 2024, CEO Adrian Wootton told a room full of academics that 'the industry' needed carpenters, and was not really interested in having intelligent, degree-educated students. So, while such reports are being commissioned, who – one might ask – is translating their results into action?

Further still, the UK's film and television industries are yet to recover from the impact of the US-based SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes of 2023. BECTU, the union for screen industries workers, estimated that some 68 per cent of freelancers are currently out of work (BECTU, 2023; Spencer, 2024). Given this significant range of issues, the evidence suggests that educators should not have been so confident in promising jobs in the 2010s and, certainly, subsequent developments confirm we cannot now.

What, one might ask, does any of this have to do with so-called independent film-making? There are two ways in which thinking about educating independent film-makers might address the issues around diversity and inclusivity, quality and sustainability of jobs. First, it is clear that the institutions of mainstream UK film and television production have collectively failed to address these, despite certain

well-meaning high-profile initiatives that were designed to. Clearly then, any efforts at meaningful change will have to take place outside of the mainstream, perhaps encouraged by, or started within, education. Second, and which might be particularly specific to a UK context, without an independent sector to keep people in regular work, the risks to the talent pipeline, so routinely mentioned by ScreenSkills and the BFI, are existential (as, indeed, had already been flagged, pre-strike, by Van Raalte and Wallis [2020]). While the United Kingdom is regarded as a talented production base to house American productions, these surely cannot be the only productions made within the UK. Indeed, the BECTU report mentioned above is a testament to the consequences of pursuing only big-budget productions from the other side of the Atlantic. Such problems are not new: film-maker Derek Jarman wrote in his quasi-memoir *Kicking the Pricks*: 'The *British Cinema* was now the property of absentee landlords, on a plan to *Hollywood*. … The old guard had left the field clear, they had stayed there making *American* product; you would be more subtle; you would make *American* product here and convince them it was *British*' (Jarman, 1996: 112 [emphasis in the original]).

Attempting to define the term 'independent film-making', King (2005: 2) suggests that we might think about 'the position of individual films, or filmmakers in terms of (1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt and (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape'. In the interview with Ben Gibson (former Producer at the BFI and then Head of the London Film School) in this special issue, Gibson argues that the first of these three is not relevant: students are, by nature, making low-budget films outside of mainstream industry. This means that educators should therefore focus on the latter two, both of which are addressed not only within Gibson's reflection on his experiences of film education, but equally by the other authors in this special issue too.

Durrett looks at the impact and legacy of international educational programme Another Kind of Girl Collective, suggesting that formal film-making education can learn from this international coalition and its work with female refugees. While the collective imparts some aspects of formal film education in theory and practice, it also focuses on soft skills, including mentorship and developing self-expression. Also exploring models of film education emphasising collective work, and collective theme, we are pleased to publish a co-written case study by staff and students on the University of Bournemouth's MA in Film Production programmes. Here, Foya et al. introduce us to the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, suggesting that practice-based film degrees might benefit from rooting themselves in respectful interactions and shared values. Given the evidence cited above about diversity and inclusivity in the film and television industries, as well as the issues of bullying and harassment, it may well be that *Ubuntu* has much greater value as it moves through students and into industry working practices.

Reflecting upon working practices in industry, Marshall and Harvey introduce readers to the Sound/Image Cinema Lab at Falmouth University, a unique partnership between local film-makers and students who are studying film-making, with some of the higher-profile collaborations being with local film-maker Mark Jenkin on his two features *Bait* (2019) and *Enys Men* (2023). In this article, Marshall and Harvey present a case study of the feature film *Long Way Back* (Brett Harvey, 2022), articulating some of the opportunities and challenges of embedding this level of film practices within a higher education environment. One can certainly see the potential here for universities, and their students, to become key players in regional film production. Finally, Loader and Maasdorp interrogate the concept of impact production, arguing that film should more actively engage with the potential for social change. Moreover, the article suggests the ways in which this might play out in an educational environment, as a practical realisation of the concept of developing 'change makers', which is so actively pushed forward in university marketing materials.

As you read this issue, it is important to remember that the purpose of these articles is to consider the ways in which educators, and students, might make positive impacts and change on mainstream industrial practice or, indeed, find ways to depart from it entirely. Quoted in the original call for papers for this issue, it is therefore worth remembering Hjort's (2013: 34) provocation that: 'the priorities and philosophies of institutions devoted to practice-oriented film education have a decisive impact on

filmmakers' creative outlooks, working practices, and networks, shaping not only the stylistic (visual and narrative) regularities that define distinctive bodies of cinematic work but the dynamics of a given film industry'. Given the highly problematic state of the mainstream film and television industries in the UK at the time of writing, coupled with the increasingly difficult environment faced by higher education institutions, it seems both that our priorities and philosophies as film educators are in serious need of revision, and that the time to do that is now.

Filmography

Bait (GB 2019, Mark Jenkin)
Enys Men (GB 2023, Mark Jenkin)
Long Way Back (GB 2022, Brett Harvey)

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