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Research article

'An intellectual environment of ambition': exploring questions of independence with film(-making) education in conversation with Ben Gibson

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Abstract

This article presents an interview with Ben Gibson, former distributor, programmer, film journalist and producer, who went on to run the London Film School from 2000 to 2014. In this interview, Gibson deconstructs what is meant by the term 'independent film-making' in an educational context. Drawing on his wealth of experience in a variety of contexts, Gibson takes apart current notions that dominate in contemporary educational and industrial discourses, surprisingly arriving at a conclusion which could lead emerging film-makers and their supporters towards a notion of independence after all.

Keywords film-making; education; London Film School; British Film Institute; ScreenSkills; higher education

The question of how we might seek to educate independent film-makers – both in 2024 and beyond – is perhaps more provocative than it might initially seem. One of the liveliest responses to this question, as posed within the current special edition of *Film Education Journal*, came from Ben Gibson, former Head of the London Film School, who challenges the very notion of 'independent film-making' as it is

commonly understood within the United Kingdom. A former distributor, programmer and film journalist, Gibson worked with The Other Cinema in the 1980s, founded the distribution company Metro Pictures and launched London's West End Metro Cinema in 1986. He served as Head of Production at the British Film Institute (BFI) from 1988 to 1998, alongside ongoing work as an independent producer, and he subsequently served as Director of the London Film School from 2000 to 2014. Since 2014, he has been Director of Degree Programs at AFTRS, the Australian National Film School in Sydney, while also serving as Director of Germany's oldest film school, DFFB Berlin, from 2016 to 2020. He currently teaches at the Central Film School London and for CFI at Pinewood Studios, as well as producing with Velvet Films and other companies. Beyond his teaching, Gibson also possesses a highly estimable track record as a creative producer, with 25 feature credits, including films with such notable directors as Terence Davies, Isaac Julien, Carine Adler, Derek Jarman, Andrea Weiss, Coky Giedroyc, John Maybury, Patrick Keiller and Andrew Kötting.

At the time of writing, the British film and television industries are facing significant challenges, in particular as related to the significant fall-out from the American writers' and actors' strikes of 2023, industrial action that has had a significant impact on the UK. Within such a context, the further question arises as to what extent the British film industry can be said to retain any meaningful degree of independence from its American counterparts. The following interview makes a significant intervention into this troubled context, drawing upon Gibson's considerable experiences of both national and international film production, alongside his equally significant, interlocking experiences of film education both in the UK and beyond. Ultimately Gibson presents a provocative and valuable critique of notions of 'independence' and how these pertain to film education, both at the time of writing and beyond.

Chris Nunn (CN): When you first responded to the call for papers for this special edition, you seemed to question its fundamental premise. The term 'independent film-makers' was, you suggested, problematic, because of the way in which it reinforced certain educational tendencies. Can you expand on that?

Ben Gibson (BG): 'How shall we encourage independent film-makers for the future of our screen industries?', we were asked. That question may well be designed to spark off debates about screening and reading lists, or guest speaker choices for the UK's swelling number of film-making degree courses. It could also animate engagement from university film faculties in a timely battle for a more creative, locally relevant and sustainable industry here. Taken as a starting point for practice curriculum design, however, it reasserts the pre-eminence of theory/reception labels over production words in the vocabulary of university courses, and so points towards pedagogical misunderstandings that demand analysis, perhaps even radical reform.

The question begs its pedantic clarifications: Which implications might such a target carry for people who are trying to procure, write or make valuable student scripts and films? In which ways could 'independent' constitute a meaningful category when talking about development or production? Considering our resources: In the simple sense implied by 'low-budget film-making', isn't this just what we do already, indicating that there aren't alternate zones we could realistically educate for? Business status can inform aesthetic strategy, of course, but why start with this category? If we are to be followers of 'independents', who are the originals? Either, historically, those who first followed Laemmle west, the non-cartel entrepreneurs who refused to pay Edison's MPPC fees and opened up the Hollywood system,[1] or, today, useful inventions of critics and academics building on auteur-related, world cinema or US B-picture genre study, and aiming to place films in manageable silos. It matters here to understand that 'independent film' is less a deliberate zone of creation than a useful category in which to place something already made. And that distinction matters if you're aiming to teach practice by considering its discrete processes from the inside – less, if you allow yourself to compose cultural targets built on abstract descriptions of outcomes that catch your attention. So, applied to film practice teaching, it's actually close to meaningless.

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CN: You have spoken before about the history, at least in the UK, of the emergence of film practice as a discrete discipline of study (Gibson, 2002). You suggested that the study of practice emerged out of the study of theory in the British universities. Can you elaborate on these tensions?

BG: Often the point of view is that theoreticians are inherently the opposite of practitioners, and [that] there can be no real debate between them. Many start from the point of view that you can't really anticipate any relationship between theory and practice in a student's work that can be easily decoded – unless you adopt the idea that they're going to be inspired by a Fritz Lang viewing to make a Fritz Lang movie, straightforwardly, and therefore, part company with the rest of the students. In this way, pastiche becomes the only way 'theory', as it's taught, can relate to film practice learning. It's not going to belong to the students. It's not going to be a process. It's going to be about categorisation.

There's discussion of 'relating theory to your practice' in project development seminars, but without attention paid to the work of discovering individual routes through a process-abstraction-process journey, or signs of confidence among the teachers that any such relationship will emerge. That's largely because the vital process of making theory out of practice, and so getting to what theory is for as a daily tool, is never discussed at all. Students are mostly taught by default that 'theories' need to be printed and published before earning the name.

Theory, first of all, is going to a stationer's shop and buying a notebook and pen. You need not worry about having to be published, or making sure the first thing you write is comprehensible. A valuable first rule for a film practice group also taking screen studies: when you've sampled Bresson's *Notes on Cinematography* and considered notational styles by [Andrzej] Wajda or [Alexander] MacKendrick writing about developing ideas, you may see where theory can work best for you: here in your own black notebook amid your listings of grammatical thefts and illuminations-for-later, solving individual screen storytelling problems in anachronistic unison with other film-makers, famous, dead or obscure, in your own words, as they gradually reveal to you their specific usefulness via your own real cases. Some film studies teachers, setting out in quiet desperation with demanding essays by [Walter] Benjamin and [Laura] Mulvey (often distributed to students so far innocent of [Siegfried] Kracauer, [André] Bazin or [Peter] Wollen), and asking for theory to 'inform' practice, seem to expect whole traditions of critical debate to sprinkle thoughtful legitimacy on the new work. Perhaps their hidden ambition [is] for inspiring but lumpy pastiche-canonical-critical texts, rather than actual redeployments of individual *mise-en-scène* elements into something new. When students [understand] that recording the things that seem to work for them in a notebook, in the noble tradition of the scientific method, is a first act of theory – and that while reading theory they should be writing it in a personal form – then those yawning respectability gaps between the breezy authority of a film studies class and the oh-so-tolerant holiday camp anti-theory atmosphere around student proposals for short film exercises can close up a little. The word cloud of media practice is full of the word 'bible' in 2023. We might start out by using it to understand the transformational value of our own gospels.

I think [that] one consequence of this distance from the experimental generation of theory is the de-professionalisation of a conservatory subject, or [the] failure to acknowledge in the UK that a conservatory subject, internationally speaking, has emerged. It's difficult to get into conversations like 'have you thought about how the film exercises at FAMU [Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague], one of which has now been redeveloped into a University of Southern California production seminar, might work here?' You can have such conversations at CILECT [International Association of Film and Television Schools]. But you can't have them in the UK, because the principles of good practice all seem so distant. Practice pedagogy is a thing for fine arts, for music, for performance, but not really for film-making. Because there's an insistence on uninformed improvisation, and on theoreticians, not practitioners, guessing how creativity might be encountered or encouraged …

CN: I'm guessing some of this thinking is drawn from your experience of running the London Film School (LFS) for 14 years?

BG: Well, yes. To be [honest] one great opportunity of LFS was that nobody liked us, and we didn't care, so we were like Millwall [Football Club]. At the beginning, it was clear to everybody I spoke to that we shouldn't become a master's programme and that, of course, we should be a bachelor's degree, which we refused. We saw that master's-level work was the most important zone for real craft teaching. And then it was clear to others that we should have a huge recruitment of students rather than keep the same number, but we saw that growing bigger would endanger what was best about us. Each choice while relaunching the school seemed controversial in a UK context, but felt, to us, obvious in industrial and international contexts.

Equally, hiring was a controversial zone. We used to joke that only Barry Salt [who taught film history and oversaw film-making for many years at LFS] – an extraordinary and important film historian – had a PhD, but actually his PhD was in physics. He was our only doctor. Alan Bernstein [the London Film School's Head of Studies for many years] has a master's degree in economics from LSE [London School of Economics and Political Science], and I was closest to UK university norms, with a master's in film studies from UEA [University of East Anglia]. That was as legally academic as we got. We wanted to take on practitioners as teachers, and we were able to. But if you looked at Alan's or Barry's lecture series, or the kind of graduate teaching I was doing, to call it anti-intellectual or anti-theory would be a total misrepresentation. It was practitioner-based, on the road to the development of theory, and powerfully informed by work in the academy too. We were trying to create an intellectual environment of ambition. That heightened level of articulacy was the basis of creative collaboration there.

One symptom of the theory–practice power problem is the way in which practice modules are internally defined for the faculty by the university's gatekeepers – people who are anxious principally about limited resources rather than academic completeness – starting from what they are not. So, UK university courses are emphatically not immersive conservatory courses in screen craft. They are not 'vocational', except in the limited sense that a student will be generally 'allowed' to make films, with new knowledge but not necessarily skills, and so no real expectation of a set of basic technical or storytelling achievements made evident through finished work. Excellence, when it arrives in these courses, will not be seen as the consequence of deep practical training. It is more likely to be seen as the result of either that elusive 'good relationship of theory to practice' (meaning some kind of academic pastiche) or, most often, of an imponderable variety of native storytelling skills brought on to the campus privately by the student on day one.

Conservatory-model, dedicated film schools are better resourced, but the major differences here aren't about money. Conservatories aim to recruit communicative, high-achieving professionals, and then allow them to acquire some formal academic qualifications during their tenure if they wish to. Universities, who just can't complete their finances without the research grants PhD-holders get for them, regularly expect career academics coming from film studies, who have maybe made a micro-documentary, to research their way, on paper and online, into teaching production-based classes and inventing a local pedagogy, unaided. Sometimes these teachers adapt to their relative ignorance, as in all modesty they must, by projecting themselves as kindly cheerleaders who stand by while we all learn together – rather than as opinionated people whose accessible experience can help newcomers catch lifelong bugs for excellence, self-organisation, deep collaboration and growing craft confidence. Although this posture can work, it can also convey the idea that technique is a subject for elsewhere, for 'professionals'. And university staff technicians, often with much better résumé reasons to run practice workshops for whole classes or units, mostly remain under-acknowledged and untrained as instructors, encouraged only to offer one-to-one advice (or 'tips') to those eager students who have the initiative to recruit them from out of their remote *IT Crowd* lairs.

CN: Partly, it seems to be the casual throwing around of the term 'industry'. When I ran the BA Film and Television Production degree at the University of Greenwich, we worked hard to do away with that in in our marketing, in our offer to students. Because I thought that, while some of our colleagues had some industry credentials and experience, the second they stepped out of that and started working with us,

they fell a bit behind. And that's not to say that that their experience wasn't still incredibly relevant. It's just to say that you need to acknowledge the space you're in now, rather than sort of revisiting the past.

BG: The web pages claim that today's film practice BAs and MAs are 'vocational' and 'industry-mirroring'. Academia's response to regular injunctions to be more transparently useful to our developing media industry and its employment requirements has been to negotiate around short-term demands, around emerging technologies or distribution formats, while suppressing basic questions about the broader mission. We know that while industry bosses like to indicate their precise short-term needs ('They must know Avid'), they also imagine that other valuable stuff ('They need to know about editing drama', or 'They need to be articulate about story') has been routinely taken care of at college. Although there are many individual teachers of practice who subscribe to the basic idea that formal education in any given field has a duty to innovate and to challenge the status quo, seeing beyond the need to simply populate specific grades in a business, you wouldn't know that from the close-relationships-with-industry rhetoric or 'industry-mirroring' exercises.

First-year BA exercise descriptions often smack of the university reassuring future bosses that they're ready to supply well-disciplined apprentices, averring that training should be offered in work as close as possible to current production genres, norms and unit structures, so avoiding the danger of producing 'misfitting' graduates. When students are mandated to undertake industry placements, they aren't asked to critique the structures and methods of the host organisations, but rather to cleave closely to local cultural expectations as a good test of their diplomatic abilities, responding obediently to the automatic legitimacy of 'business' over any childish attachments to provocation or new ideas they might bring.

Another still-widespread idea behind the use of the term 'independent', that Fordist industrial production dominates a 'mainstream' built around the US majors and the big TV networks, and that artisanal collaboration is unique to certain much smaller enterprises, is also seriously out of date. (Arguably it was [Irving] Thalberg, in the 1930s, who pushed back against Fordist assumptions about factory film-making protocols in favour of acknowledging an intimate, team-based, artisanal task in creating the executive producer/unit system: team-building Volvos rather than pushing out Fords.) And yet, [higher education] recruitment pages live off this old factory-based idea of one great well-oiled industry, the internationally financed future utopia projected by nostalgic TV executives and studio-building tycoons. As our real, more complex business grows steadily in financial and employment significance, what might we need to know about the underlying trends of the UK media industry in 2024 to design media and film courses?

We know that a larger proportion of streamer shows and TV dramas than ever, the vast majority, is being commissioned and its development overseen in the US, rather than locally. We know that there's a hunger for new writing, the market no longer based on submitting sample episodes, but, by now, on appreciating the eccentricities of spec pilots, more than ever about individuality as well as craft skills for the emerging screenwriters. We know that there are big problems filling certain craft jobs from within the UK, and that this has focused a great deal of attention on public training authorities' policy development and spending, mostly on targeted short introductory courses delivered outside London. We know that most of the imported US film professionals coming to work in the UK on series or films will have three-year MFA practice-based terminal degrees in film-making, something which has never been offered or actually considered in the UK, but is now commonplace around the world (akin only to the shapes of an NFTS [National Film and Television School] or LFS MA). We know that the BFI has expressed its despair that the paid low-budget feature sector has been all but eliminated by inflated head of department wage norms pushed up by the streamers, making it harder than ever to make films for under £5 million, and that although it's fought hard for a bigger tax write-off for smaller films in response to this, it has no other big policy or demand-driven answer to suggest. We know that expected mergers and acquisitions in the US entertainment sector, sudden strikes or even small exchange rate changes can end the UK streaming drama production boom as fast as it has accelerated, so that other long-term uses for our shining new studios and the young film professionals might be urgently needed. And we know that the isolating

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factors of Brexit will play out consistently to challenge the industry with uncomfortable isolation. I'm not sure these realities are reflected at all in UK course design.

CN: I'm involved in a few discussions with independent producers at the moment about the state of the British film industry. But perhaps you know specifically what's happened when we realise that no one's got any jobs if the writers and the actors in America are on strike. So, there's a question, a very genuine question, I think, here in Britain about what, if anything, our industry looks like if there's not American money coming into it.

BG: If you can say to the students: 'Our job is not merely to repopulate the industry, but to reinvent it'; that's what the cultural job of film schools has been, and that's why film schools exist, that doesn't stop [students] from doing important craft things which show they have abilities that are highly saleable. But it does allow them to realise that they're going to be successful in proportion to the degree to which they allow themselves to operate outside of short-term anxieties, and to take the risks needed. But the industry isn't really asked to acknowledge all that. Think about the way employers are now involved in coursework. I'm an external examiner for a degree where industry people help decide what the students take on in certain exercises, built around an employer's audiovisual needs. That's good contact with independent companies. The danger is that, wrongly handled, those exercises might actually be freezing old grammar, making dull stuff. My current MA students are about to be sent on placements, and I don't want them to work out how to fit in by making hot coffee that arrives fast, so much as to write a critique of the organisation, and say whether you think it's got any chance of surviving current developments in the industry.

I'm drawing on years [producing] at the BFI and after. Mia Bays [Director of the British Film Institute's Filmmaking Fund] has cash to put into independent film at the BFI now which we could only have dreamt about in the 1990s. But in the meantime, I fear that Channel 4, plus even the people at the BBC or the BFI, may have forgotten the simple Jeremy Isaacs plan: UK theatrical cinema, financed here. Jeremy Isaacs is the only reason that there's any kind of independent film sector. The BFI is working hard, making women's cinema and Black cinema and regional cinema and rural cinema, and all of those things that really do need to be made. And still, getting to a point of making cinema which is less driven only by people with inheritances and private education is more difficult, and standing up for formal experiment and eccentric styles is more difficult, when budgets keep going inexorably up.

Why have they gone up so fast and so completely? Low-budget film-making hasn't been protected by specific BECTU [Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union] or PACT [Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television] agreements, or by any strong determination to fully fund work from public funds, as was really needed. So, as they got more expensive, they were co-funded by the same few people, the usual suspects, something which tends to compromise the robustly provocative or experimental. Films that used to cost £500,000 now cost £2.5 million, because the high-end TV production boom created a new wage base for qualified heads of department in the UK. So suddenly, there's a new crisis. The BFI doesn't know what to do about keeping low-budget production levels up, beyond getting a great tax rebate deal, which will help, but may not bring in new people. I think the bigger problem is the one we've had for so long: is the local audience, in theatres, but also the television audience or the streaming audience, actually being addressed by local British cinema as a form, from here, or are they one accidental audience slice of an expensive, exotic TV form designed for other audiences?

CN: Returning to education, then, what are some of the key areas that higher education could or should focus on?

BG: Production courses put great emphasis on the idea of collaboration, but then standard exercises often fail to define its demands, beyond polite injunctions towards sympathetic mutual support. The

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typical first exercise, at a key moment for the mis-learning of core attitudes, asks students to make their own five-minute shorts as writer-directors. But should they really be allowed to mis-start an education in screen practice using the expression 'my film'?

Such early exercises are dogged by the powerful but incoherent sense of a personal burden, a lonely ownership not conferred by the student's unit, but by the isolating rules of exercises which conceive of students as individual customers trying to focus on complex challenges, and responding to stress by routinely blocking out the not-yet-appreciated interruptions of close colleagues, and often mistaking isolation for determination or even clarity.

One vital first principle of practice pedagogy is that the other students are the key resource to be marshalled for success. Framers of the strongest practice curricula begin exercises by insisting that writer, director and producer are different people, so distinguishing between help ('I'll get up at 6 a.m. for your incoherent story because you did it for my wonderful short') and collaboration, celebrating the effort to imagine your way to the centre of a colleague's precise ambition, to deliver what's needed in a way that completes the task, while leaving you satisfied with your own imaginative work, often in a grade which wasn't your choice (and you shouldn't be allowed to choose, you should work at whatever you need most work on – it's a school, after all).

BA degrees in media production also routinely and actively conspire with students' early feelings (or anxieties) that a clear early specialisation will help forge a clearer path to success and employment, although graduates and teachers come to see that it's mostly about knowing the whole job for at least your first three short films. While admitting that there are candidates whose prior learning has led them on a definite specialist path (often sound recordists and production designers, sometimes cinematographers), and that they are unlikely to switch about, we also must admit that they will learn about their future role in a unit only by doing the other jobs well in compulsory rotation, not by simply witnessing them or digesting cultural assumptions about other departments.

Most BA and MA students will be elected to a clear specialisation via the acclaim of their peers as soon as the choice is allowed and is going to make a real difference to the outcome, at graduation. The implication is that although students should certainly be allowed to study harder in their chosen specialisms, they should be accompanied by their whole unit to every consultation on each department for an exercise, so that all the jobs remain open to all throughout. Scheduling specialist classes against one another, eliminating this auditing, limits this possibility, and conspires with the fiction that specialisation and professionalism are interchangeable. We know that, if we are taking care of education as well as training, we must plan for the unexpected journeys, and not just fill gaps. And what real use is a producer who has avoided directing a film? Or a cinematographer who can't really imagine how many questions a director is asked per minute, because they haven't ever done it?

All the people in the whole industry who are on boards at ScreenSkills [an industry-led skills body that accredits selected UK film and television courses best suited to prepare new entrants for a career in the screen industries] seem to be absolutely sure that you should decide that you're going to be the focus puller when you're 17. Which is exactly the opposite of what happens in an MFA programme, a successful graduate programme. It's a mistake about the difference between professionalism and specialisation. I say to people, what you should do is take a degree in journalism, and then go to the awards ceremony, and you'll find somebody who is giving out the prizes, that they've never been to a school of journalism before in their lives, because, although they read the news out on television every night, they've actually got a degree in ancient history. And they've never heard of a journalism degree. And that's how the ruling class manipulates you: by making you think that your special, early specialisation is your only chance of getting out of the gutter. And it's a complete contradiction. What universities are supposed to be are open spaces for developing the leading ideas in the culture. And yet they fail to deliver for people committed to media practice, because the internal debate is based on the certainty that they can't actually get to any depth, that complex practice is elsewhere – but that students who want to think and act standing up should specialise early. It's just all very amateur.

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CN: One of the issues that I don't think we've quite addressed is this idea that we might want to have people studying film-making who might otherwise not do it, if cost were a barrier. So, your three-year conservatory, MFA model, which I think is exactly where we would like to see film-makers educated, falls down on cost. That means we're stuck with the same elites who could have gone anywhere being able to take these courses. Because they can, and because they've got the money and time. Where, you know, many of the students that I taught at the University of Greenwich, for example, would be working-class, or first in family to university – perhaps both.

BG: I think you're absolutely right. My big thing at the London Film School was to try and take the NFTS monopoly away by turning up in every forum that Nik [Powell, former Director of the NFTS] was at for ten years, until we ended up with these SkillSet bursaries where [the student] paid nothing. And, I mean, you know, there are people like Jonathan Entwistle, who made *The End of the F***ing World* for Netflix next, who was one of our students on a bursary. And, I mean, if you look across interesting stuff on ITV and the BBC at the moment: there are 10 or 15 of those people who at that time got the money. Now, what ScreenSkills have done since then is say: 'We don't want to have screen academy bursaries any more, because we find them expensive.' Which means, in effect, that the only way you can get a free pass to a graduate education in film in the UK is to get one of those foundation grants that's given out on the day that you register at the National Film School. There is absolutely no other deal, which was how it was when I came into the education business in 2000.

But then the trouble is, if you've got fees that are that are, like, £10,966 per term [for six terms], there are people who will pay it. And you have to have some mixed economy, which makes perfect sense to me. The current policy for training future film-makers in the UK is strongly skewed towards many BA grads, rather than supporting higher-level work. And the fact is that very many film-makers, worldwide, study film craft at graduate level having studied something else to BA or BSc level, so we miss out on them.

The other thing about graduate schools is that not everywhere has got them. And a good thing about graduate schools is that people realise, to their lifelong benefit, that there isn't really any such thing as a local film culture. There's a local film industry in terms of mathematics and politics, but in terms of developing style and thinking about narrative form in film-making, the influence of being exposed to lots of other different traditions that other students bring has a definitive impact on the students. So, not being international enough can be a major cultural problem.

So I think another path is required now. One should create more 2–3 year MAs, and if possible MFA's in the American style, but it's very difficult to argue for with so many smaller offers out there. The NFTS after Colin Young has an odd way of misunderstanding its own significance culturally. So its ads sometimes trumpet that there are 10 NFTS sound editors on a new Bond picture. Good, but the idea that it costs £70k a year to train the sound editors on Bond I find just a little unimpressive, when the last significant director they're boasting of is Lynne Ramsey, who graduated more than 20 years ago. There's just a terrible confusion about what it's all there for. It's built on very British anti-intellectual rhetoric about what the industry requires, with a board including, for instance, the ambulance-chasing 'tax-based' investors who have nothing much to do with advocating truly independent film. One thing the industry urgently requires is strong new director franchises, in fact. This matters a great deal because the NFTS and LFS, from the point of view of rigour and cultural value, are our really important assets.

CN: Thinking about the future, then, what could educational institutions, academics and industry do now, together, to secure a pipeline for new film-making talent?

BG: There are some excellent film production programmes, and good teachers who routinely overcome local limitations or incomplete modules. Dedicated practice teachers, and many who aren't greatly experienced in production, understand how to engage students, mix elements, inspire and co-teach effectively, given a real chance to teach with practitioners. While we salute those classes and exercises

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being delivered every day by imaginative academics, we should supplement that tribute by demanding some new space to debate radical and incremental improvements to university film-making, rather than continuously leaning into these stores of personal self-sacrifice and hoping for fresh miracles of improvisation. To return to where we started, my adjusted question about 'independent film-makers' would be: With some real independence from management caution, received ideas about film-making and ill-conceived responses to industry pressure, could we reform pedagogical models for screen practice, in order to restore value, energy and credibility?

What's the alternative to such an urgent review? Doing nothing about the teaching and learning pattern in BA and MA media practice risks a continuing loss of credibility with students and their sponsors. Those under-supplied with sufficient or effective practice teaching, lacking that solid vocational base that was advertised, may end first degrees more convinced that professional screen storytelling is beyond their practical or intellectual reach than they had been on arrival. That's a definite loss for them, and negative word-of-mouth for the courses. The root of any growing uncertainty about their talents will be found somewhere near that paralysing excess of empty freedom that the cut-down individual production 'opportunity' offers, in place of structured and craft-conscious exercises building basic understandings and confidence, experiences university media schools could so easily have borrowed without spending any more cash. Of course, 'vocational' and 'media' remain strong selling words, but suppose that over time they become the recognised domains of six-month immersive courses and apprenticeships, rather than of bachelor's degrees, what then?

If the UK could establish a growing regime of BA (or BFA) degrees in film-making, which use the energies of their students to build detail and excitement, rediscovered in dusty makeshift studio annexes in old church halls, bringing in enthusiastic local film-makers, running truly immersive craft upgrade courses with government agency support, admitting their relative poverties, but embracing students' ambition and getting more disciplined and inspiring in making their connections between historical knowledge and new work (and regularly asking those pro-philistine students who won't attend the black-and-white screenings to name one wealthy American director who isn't obsessively collecting notes based on old movies at night), admitting that the first degree is an understanding and an invitation, but might have to be topped with much more work, including some accessible MFAs to be launched next, putting the UK strongly on the international map for film courses, too … Given some of this stuff, and an open debate about what effective production courses should deliver, there could be a glorious next chapter for what has mushroomed into a huge, locally competitive but sometimes parochially underdeveloped sector in UK tertiary education.

Which may bring us round to that challenge about encouraging 'independent' film-making after all. The UK, a country with a long chronicle of short-lived, neglected and casually abandoned independent media initiatives, needs a determined alliance to push policy-makers and financiers from government, the BFI, C4 and the BBC, creating new structures for local film and TV underneath the international streaming boom, and insisting on autonomy and discovery as core values. University media education should be at the epicentre of any power map for such a progressive lobby. One first requirement for finding students who will take a decisive interest in independent work for the UK: letting them know that there's an undervalued history of independent film all around them.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The author is a current editor for this journal. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

*The End of the F***ing World* (GB 2017–19, Jonathan Entwistle, Lucy Tcherniak, Lucy Forbes, Destiny Ekaragha, Channel 4)

Note

1. Carl Laemmle (1867–1939) was a German immigrant to the United States who challenged Thomas Edison's Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), and the monopoly they held on the film industry. Banking instead on the power of individual stars to drive interest in new movies, Laemmle and his peers could be said to be the first US 'independents' who broke away from Edison's conglomerate. The independent group he established later formed the basis for Universal Studios, which was established by Laemmle in 1915.

Reference

Gibson, B. (2002) *Projections 12: Filmmakers on Film Schools*. Faber & Faber, 55.

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