

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

## HOW TO CHALLENGE THE IMAGINATIVE POWER OF FILM STUDENTS?

**It is** both an honour and a heavy responsibility to open this conference.

Being together here as a family of cinema, we all know how important the opening of a film is. In good films, and even in bad films, the first five minutes contain everything the film is about in a concise way and even better: in a teasing, inviting, seductive way. The opening of a film says: "here are the ingredients, this is the language we are going to use, hop on the train and join our ride". That sounds easy. But we all know that this is perhaps one of the most difficult parts of making a film. And we also know that if the first five minutes aren't right, it will be difficult to keep your audience on board.

So it is my task to come up with something that keeps you all on board. Not for 90 minutes, but for three days.

I was asked to open this conference because in the last school year I was appointed as an 'artist in residence' in this school. My assignment had more or less the same title as this conference: How to challenge the imaginative power of film students?

I was surprised with the request that I be the NFTA's first 'artist in residence', as I have hardly any teaching experience in film. I am a filmmaker, not a teacher. I felt that I was an outsider in the field of education. On the other hand, being educated as a philosopher — although in a far away past, some 25 years ago — I knew that the best position to make an analysis of a problem or situation is from the outside.

When you are involved, when you are part of something, your thinking and acting is regulated by the self-evident. Not because you are stupid or superficial, but because it is the only way to survive. The self-evident guides us through our lives. It gives a certain transparency to our acts.

Most of you here together are people of the shop-floor, full time teachers with a massive experience, full of detailed knowledge about how to approach film students. So I decided to make a modest contribution to this conference, by pointing out to you the self-evident.

Most of what I have to say you will easily be recognise as what we call in Holland 'open doors', which means stating the obvious. But I like 'open doors', especially when it takes an effort to see them, and even more when they're not always as open as people think.

It is my intention to give you a framework in which the question of this conference: How to challenge the imaginative power of film students? can be understood.

Let us begin with a simple diagram, or blueprint that more or less locates the positions and questions involved in the subject of this conference. (see below)

I think there are two typical student films. Both are clichés and never will be found in their purest form, but they are helpful for my blueprint:

1. The student film that can be compared with the adolescent poem: heavy, unarticulated emotions, highly autobiographical, baroque, an outcry, and with hardly any consistent form. (I think that some titles and students out of your experience have just come to mind.) You could say that these films are only personality.

In any school year there are at least one or two students who are the kings of this genre. Most of the time these students are cherished by only a few teachers. The students who make these films are recognised by those teachers as creative, personal, daredevil, emotional and above all vulnerable. They are considered to be fragile talents who need to be protected.

Most of their other teachers think they are a pain in the ass. They break every thinkable rule, they are egocentric, not to say selfish, and they create chaos in the difficult and regulated process of making movies.

I must admit that I have a weak spot for these films and the students who made them, but not so weak a spot that I consider these films as great films. Most of the time they lack form and consistency. There is no control over the story and emotions. These highly individual ingredients are just there, mixed but uncooked. But I see them not so

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much as films, as more as documents. They are documents of youth, of emotional development, and on that level they can be extremely moving.

2. The other cliché student film is the opposite of these documents of adolescence or puberty.

These films are craft, and only craft. On a technical level everything is perfect: glossy lightning, spectacular camera movement, impressive sets and locations, bombastic sound effects and music. These films are the playground of technique. The students are playing around in the kindergarten of film making, and inevitably the reaction to these films is that they have nothing to tell.

This is an interesting genre, especially for the Netherlands Film Academy, because our school has the reputation that its final exam films are mostly technical perfect, but of little substance. I think that this image has already become a cliché, confirmed year after year by the Dutch film critics, and like most clichés, it's only half true.

Why should we take this critique negatively? One can also say that the school has managed to train its students to a high level of technical standards, and that these students are competent to find their place in the audio-visual industry. Every creative producer or director can get what he wants from them.

However, in my opinion the aim of this school, and every film school, should be more ambitious.

I have a great respect for technique. It is the language of the filmmaker. But as we all know, it is not the words that matter, but how we combine them, and what we have to say with them that is important.

The premise of this conference points to the fact that we have higher ambitions, ambitions that transcend technique and the desire to teach more than craft.

How to challenge the imaginative power of film students? It is an intriguing question. Where do we locate this imaginative power? Do we find it at the level of personality or at the level of craft?

During the period of my appointment at the Netherlands Film and Television Academy, I frequently felt there was a misunderstanding about the location of the imagination. This misunderstanding is, I think, connected to a fundamental misunderstanding about art, which in turn is connected to the romantic image of the artist.

The misunderstanding is that the imagination is solely located on the level of personality. It is a strong cliché that the real imagination is associated with individualism, artistic autonomy, personal emotions, and deviant behaviour.

If it is weird, it must be imaginative, and it must be art. Personality and Art are assumed to be synonymous.

At the other end of the spectrum, on the level of craft, you find an overreaction to this romantic idea of art. To protect these positions, not to mention their egos, there are people who subscribe to the idea that making a film is only labour that can be learned as rules and recipes.

I exaggerate for heuristic purposes, to draw a sharp contrast between the positions.

So, where do I locate imaginative power? I think it is located somewhere between personality...and...craft.

That is to say: imagination is a process of translation. It's about how to translate the ingredients of the personality, i.e. the story that has to be told and the urge to share individual emotions and ideas with an audience. How can personality be translated to something that is more than an individual or personal outcry.

The essential bridge in this process of translation is craft. The elements of craft bring the personality into communication with the audience.

This brings us to the following diagram.

[ART] [LABOUR]

PERSONALITY - CRAFT AUDIENCE -  
IMAGINATION > COMMUNICATION

[IDEA] [LANGUAGE]

I think we should replace the word "art" with "idea," and "labour" into "language." These words are less infected with this hidden ideological fight between art and labour. They show the direction of the imagination.

I warned you that I would kick in 'open doors'. I've told you the self evident.

Exercises

I will give you some examples how this diagram of 'open doors' can illuminate self evident directions that to me seem to go in the wrong direction.

With this diagram in hand, it was quite easy

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to recognise an odd practice at NFTA.

This school makes a big thing of exercises in which all the disciplines are involved in making a film work together. You could say they are simulations of making a film, and they move from 5 minute exercises to longer and more complicated pieces. The whole practice is well thought-out.

However, what I considered as odd was that most of these exercises had solely technical parameters. The limitations and regulations of these little films were indicated solely with technical boundaries such as length of shooting, choice of stock, equipment, crew, location, number of actors. Of course, part of this was a variety of risk-management, and the other part was motivated by the sense of an honest division of means. All students are equal and all students deserve an equal chance. Very understandable, and certainly very honourable.

But it seemed strange to me that the content was free, unlimited, within the technical limits of course.

What kind of signal does this give this to the students? It would seem that technique, or craft comes before content, personality. I think the signal should in all cases the other way around. Content, personality, comes before technique, craft.

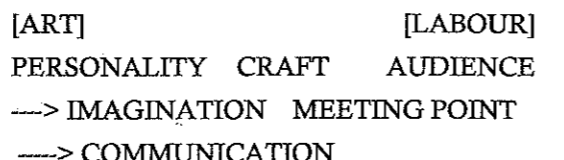
My suggestion was and is that the school should come up with thematically-driven exercises, and the technical/linguistic support should be dependent from the choice of content. For this is the direction of the imagination: from personality to craft to audience.

This brings us back to the diagram. It points out to us another important issue that influences the education of imagination.

Filmmaking has a strong practical tradition of division of labour. It is quite easy to lo-

cate the script writers and the directors on the level of personality. They come up with the stories and they are the starting point of the process.

But in this diagram it is clear that they can only reach the audience through craft. It is the disciplines of camera, sound, design and editing that provide the language. In the process of translation the imagination is involved from both sides! The imagination is, so to say, a meeting point of personality and craft.



[IDEA] [LANGUAGE]

I stress this, because I was very often surprised by a certain artistic animosity between the domains of personality and craft, equally by students and by teachers. It was as if there was a fight about who really is making the movie.

To me it is clear where the film is made: at the meeting point, where the imagination of personality and craft are shared.

NFTA is organized along the traditional lines of the division of labour in the audio-visual industry. Every discipline has its own curriculum, and the curricula come together in exercises and student films. It is clear that every discipline has the responsibility to educate its own students.

But with reference to our diagram, it is similarly clear that the different disciplines have even a higher responsibility to educate the students from the other disciplines.

A film school has to make clear to its students that a film is made at this meeting point. Now, very often the students meet at the moment of making a film. We all know this is a moment of stress, chaos, nervous break downs, and not a moment of clear thinking.

That is why I promote the idea of bilateral education. Bring together students from two disciplines, let them work together on exercises, and teach them how to communicate with each other, without the load of all the other disciplines.

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NFTA has some nice examples of these bilateral exercises, but they are ad hoc. It is my suggestion that this idea of bilateral education, systematically directed be at the heart of film production education, because on this bilateral level, the students will enter the heart of the process of film making. They will be at the meeting point, the location of the imagination. Here the students can learn to share a language and they can learn the specific demands and challenges of the imagination that are important for certain disciplines that are not their own.

I end with some more 'open doors'.

Craft without personality is empty, as is technique without content.

Content without imagination, which means without the use of techniques of all the departments involved in the process of film making, is useless, because it is non-communicative. If you can't reach an audience, what's the point of trying to tell a story?

