

To be a Filmmaker : On Contemporary Film Profession Education

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Abstract: *Different from the academic-oriented film education, which aims to cultivate the researchers of film studies, the education of filmmaking professionals is fairly a complex and diverse process. Considering the particularity of the film production industry, this paper sets out to analyze the educational process of film production from a comprehensive perspective, not only limited to the single mode of film school education. Therefore, three modes of film education will be focused for the discussion: the hands-on practice within the film industry, the professional training in film schools, and the self-taught filmmaking by digital media. Through an analysis of the advantages and the disadvantages of these three different film education modes, the interconnections between them will be discovered. In so doing, educational reference and guidance can be drawn for those who are willing to engage in the film production industry.*

Key words: *film education; the hands-on practice in the film industry; the professional training in film schools; and the self-taught film making through the digital media*

Introduction

Since the birth of film art more than a century ago, it has not only developed into a mature art, but also a new discipline. At present, universities all over the world continue to offer the film related courses, and new film colleges focusing on practicing film making have thrived. Based on academic resources, universities provide their students with scientific and philosophical approaches of doing film studies. By contrast, there are various ways of cultivating filmmaking professionals. This kind of educational diversity can be generally divided into three categories: the hands-on practice in the film industry; the professional training in film schools; and the self-taught film making through the digital media. The proportion of filmmaking professionals cultivated by these three modes of education currently is different from that before the information age. Nowadays, the boundaries between these three ways are often blurred, and their advantages and disadvantages are often interacted and transformed with each other. Particularly, corresponded with film shooting transformed by the digital media, the modes of film education are also changing greatly and profoundly. This paper will investigate these three modes of film education respectively.

The hands-on practice in the film industry

James Cameron once said that one of the luckiest things in his life was that he did not go to film school. Obviously, he embarked on film shooting through his self-taught and hands-on learning in the film industry. In fact, this was a common way since the birth of the film. At the beginning stage of the film industry, the number of people entering the business of film production without professional education like James Cameron is the largest. Many people then did not receive orthodox educational credentials from colleges or universities but came to the gate of the studio with their enthusiasm for the film and the skills related to the film. They usually started from a bottom-level job with a low salary and learned relevant knowledge and skills bit by bit. Their learning process and working process are closely intertwined at the same time.

The education in the traditional film industry system is a learning process based on the film shooting practice. In order to learn the skills from the capable and experienced, the learners often participate in film shooting as their apprentices or assistants. This is actually a very old but effective way of learning, just as apprentices learned skills from their masters in carpentry or cookery at the ancient time. The same is true of learning film production techniques. For those who want to learn film production, they can find an experienced person to work with, not only to learn valuable experience, but also to get remuneration to make a living. In more than 100 years since the birth of film, most people have entered the film industry in this way.

Compared with the professional training in a film school, the traditional educational form within the film industry still has great advantages. Take the film color correction work in the digital age as an example. First of all, film color correction is a job that relies on a large number of expensive professional equipment. Not all film schools are able to provide such latest equipment for every student to use. However, there is plenty time to use the equipment in the film production industry and to sharpen their skills constantly. Secondly, there are many opportunities for the learners to know those “masters” who are helpful for their own development in their professional fields, some of them are their own colleagues, some of them their own bosses, and some of them their customers. Hence,

good equipment and useful social contacts become the greatest advantages that the mode of the hand-on practice within the film industry can boast of itself.

Fu Shu is a Chinese film colorist. She started her film career in 2013 from scratch. Up till now, she has finished the color correction for four films, one of which, *The Coming Storm* (2017), has won many awards including the best artistic contribution award at the Tokyo International Film Festival. In a lecture, she talked about her learning experience in the film industry as follows. After graduating from university, she moved to Beijing, the center city of China's film and television industry. She had never studied the color correction technology of films before. After arriving in Beijing, she began to work in various companies. In order to learn the technology of color correction, she first applied for the position of colorist assistant in those film and television companies, but no company was willing to hire her because she had not any experience before. She had to apply for another low-paid positions in a film and television company. After entering the company, she began to use her spare time to enter the color correction room of the company. Gradually, she learned the basic skills of color correction by herself. Later, she was permitted to participate in the work of color correction by the boss. Three years later, she completed the color correction work of *Home Away* (2016) as an independent colorist for the first time. Then she started her career as a recognized film colorist.

Fu Shu's case shows that it is still feasible for beginners without any educational background and experience to enter the film industry and achieve success. The filmmakers who first joined in the film industry lack the reserve of knowledge and experience in no doubt a limitation, but good equipment and pragmatic human resources can often make them get twice the result with half the effort. By the way, the digital revolution makes everyone stand in the same running line. No matter the experienced old photographers or the young people just entering the university campus, they all have the same digital technology in front of them. To some extent, it also provides a relatively equal competition environment for young people.

Another strength for the hands-on learning in the film industry is that film companies have their own short-term professional development courses, which are often offered by experienced professionals to the personnel who need to improve urgently in the early stage of the industry. These training courses generally last for one or two weeks with highly concentrated contents but very useful film production techniques. The training can be quite expensive, but it is well worth it. Although some of the courses can also be learned online at this information age, for beginners in the film industry, such courses are undoubtedly of great help.

However, with the popularity of film schools, it seems more and more difficult to enter in the film industry directly and then become a filmmaker. First, it is not easy to find even the simplest job. The projects of film shooting are limited, but the people participating in the competition are many. For various reasons, HR or producers of film companies are more likely to choose those who have had relevant education or have engaged in other filmmaking work before. Hence, the competitors who have no work experience may face the bad luck of being eliminated.

The limitation of this way of selection should not be ignored. Owing to the strict internal regulations and strong technical professionalism of the film industry, when a filmmaker is not willing to work in the current machinery and wants to move up to a higher level, he or she may find that what has learned in film industry is actually difficult to meet the skill

requirements of higher level of creative work.

The particularity of the film industry is that film making is not only a technology-based industry, but also a creative work of art, which is full of artistry in every link. The lighting workers in charge of the lamps may only need to be familiar with the specifications and methods of using each lamp to complete the work, but they are ordered to do the art creation by the lighting designers or photographers. Obviously, the bottom work of the film industry does not require a high-level knowledge and ability, but the top work does. A position in charge of props management only needs to master the basic management skills, a makeup position only needs to master the basic makeup skills, but a position in charge of props and image design needs to have professional skills and certain knowledge reserve, especially, it needs the ability to create the image with good understanding of the director's intention. This higher position demands a long-time practical experience, systematic knowledge of the film, and high level of art creation abilities. It is difficult for those who have already worked in the film industry to put aside their existing work to make a devoted and special study for this kind of creative and professional position. To be more exact, without a right learning opportunity and without high-rank professionals' voluntary help, it is very hard for the bottom filmmakers to upgrade their career.

By contrast, those excellent graduates from film schools are more likely to obtain high positions in the film making industry after their graduation. The significance of professional education at film schools is increasingly highlighted. Nowadays those who are willing to engage in film production from a higher starting point would prefer to go to a film school.

The professional training at film schools

Since the first batch of film academies represented by the National Film Academy of the Soviet Union came into being (in 1919), film schools have been an attractive but controversial place, which is still the case today. In general, the education of film schools can be divided into two main categories: the professional education and the academic education. Although the first batch of film schools are almost professional schools relying on the studio system, the earliest academic film education started almost at the same time.

Professional film education is still adopted by a few film schools today. These film schools are almost the best or even the only film school in a country, with the best teachers and the most advanced teaching equipment in the country. Because of the close relationship with the local film industry, the employment rate of students is always very high. However, limited by the small number of enrollments, only a few of applicants can finally be enrolled by this kind of film schools. For example, National Film and Television School (UK), Beijing Film Academy (China), The Film School of the University of Southern California (USA), The Film School of New York University (USA), and so on. The academic film education has been marginalized by university education for a long time. Since the 1950s, with the influence of the French New Wave and the introduction of European and American classical theoretical research methods, such as semiotics, Freudianism, experience psychology, Marxism, etc., the academic film education has been gradually recognized and valued all over the world, film studies has become an independent discipline in many colleges and universities. At present, film schools often combine both professional and academic education, and thereby become more comprehensive and integrative. However, a small number of distinguished film schools

still retain the tradition of their independence of professional training as they were established at the very beginning and do not belong to any university.

After nearly a hundred years of evolution, professional film schools have developed into four types: the industrial, the independent, the experimental, and the documentary. The industrial film schools and the independent film schools account for a considerable proportion of global professional film schools.

The industrial film schools are set up to train professionals for the mature or more specialized film industry. They often recruit students according to different types of work in the film industry, such as directing, photography, performance, sound, editing, etc. Before entering the school, students already know their own learning direction, that is, they know what they are going to do after their graduation, so they only concentrate on their own majors at school. As they have received concentrated professional training, they can fit themselves seamlessly into the specific positions in the film industry as soon as they leave school. Hence, the employment rate of the industrial film colleges is always high.

The independent film colleges aim to cultivate versatile or know-all masters for filmmaking, and their training goal is to make their students familiar with every aspect of film making; and particularly, the students are expected to have the ability to complete independent film shooting under limited conditions after graduation. However, although students have learned every aspect of film shooting, their competitiveness in the film industry is often inferior to that of the students in an industrial film school. This is due to their lack of in-depth and specialized learning on a certain skill.

For the experimental film school, filmmaking is only an kind of art creation, a tool to express one's ideas and feelings in an art form as well, this tool for expression can be music, photography, drama, etc., so the study of film creation education is only based on the study of art itself. Because more attention is paid to the exploration and development of an artist's individual expression of film, the commerciality and public aesthetics of the film are often ignored.

The documentary film school focus on the production of documentary or news. Their students not only learn filmmaking skills, but also learn some necessary public relations skills like journalists, so they often focus on social events and public affairs.

The industrial film colleges, with the longest history of professional education, is still one of the favorable colleges for students to apply for. There are many reasons. First, since the industrial film colleges have a long history, they usually have the most experienced teachers and public reputation. Secondly, they are closely related to the existing film industry, and some successful VIPs in the film industry are often invited to give students lectures. Therefore, their students can easily get good internship opportunities in the film industry easily. Thirdly, the industrial film colleges can get the government financial support from many countries, nor can the donations from alumni be underestimated. Thus, they have ability to purchase the latest film making equipment and to set up various scholarships to finance the needy students. Fourthly, the professional major setting of industrial film school enables students to expose themselves to the most cutting-edge professional knowledge in the field of their interest. Undoubtedly, this can be the most beneficial for those students with clear goals. Finally, the industrial film colleges can guarantee the educational equity to the greatest extent. As the number of students is rather small, the provision of educational resources is abundant. Accordingly, students can enjoy

equal opportunities to learn from experienced teachers and to use film making equipment without restrictions, the competitive pressure among students will be correspondingly reduced.

However, there are some disadvantages for the industrial film schools at the same time. Firstly, the industrial film schools are more like ivory towers, and the competition for admission to some popular majors such as directing, photography, performance, etc. is particularly intensive. This makes them provide a kind of elite education, more talented people could be shut out. Secondly, some people after graduation find that they are more suitable for another major, but they will find they are facing a serious problem of re-selection. Thirdly, since the students from an industrial film college only focus on their own major and do not know much about other aspects of film art creation, their understanding of film is limited and may have some problems about communicating with people from different departments once they leave the school gate, this could affect their earlier career development.

Compared with the industrial film schools, the independent film schools are completely different. They have a high-ideal film concept and generally believe in the principle of "film is the art of directors", so their goal is to help all students to develop their own ability to make their own films, in short, to become directors and to be able to shoot films independently after graduation. Therefore, all students usually have only one major: filmmaking. At school, students will learn all kinds of film making skills to establish a comprehensive understanding of film. Every student will participate in several film projects with different roles. As every project only has one director, independent film schools often choose this director by voting among students and teachers, the judging criterion is the competitors' own scripts. Once a student becomes a director, he or she will have the right to lead other students who have failed in the election. When they cannot agree with each other's opinion, the director will have the last word. This system makes every student have a strong sense of crisis when they are at school and learn how to win in this fierce competition. Of course, such competition is everywhere in the film industry, the competition at school can be regarded as a warm-up exercise for after graduation.

Because of the director competition system that most independent film schools generally implement, the educational resources tend to favor those top students, so it is difficult to consider the needs of all students. This is a cruel elimination system, which is unfair to those slower students. As an inevitable problem for independent film schools, to reduce educational inequality and unfairness, every student is encouraged to shoot his or her own film directed by himself or herself when they graduate. Some schools will help their students with equipment and finance at this stage.

The independent film schools shed light on their value when the contradiction between film schools and the film industry cannot be reconciled. Take Hollywood for an example. The "kids" from film schools represented by George Lucas and Steve Spielberg let the film industry begin to provide valuable resources for the new directors who just left film schools in order to shoot more films like *Star Wars* and *Jaws*. But the film industry has always be driven by money. When the boss of a film company found that not every graduate from film school can bring as much profit as Lucas and Spielberg did, their cooperation with film schools came to end. Since then, a group of independent film school students, represented by the film school of New York University, have begun to get opportunities in Hollywood or fight for their position in the film world through their own

merit and effort, the most famous of them may be Joel Coen.

Nowadays, professional film schools pave the way for most young people who want to enter the film industry. Apart from offering relevant skills and knowledge of filmmaking, film schools display their bridge role in three respects: First, helping students to participate in film festivals. Film schools can provide students with professional shooting equipment and shooting team (which is usually composed of students, a kind of mutual help relationship). Meanwhile, most film school will appoint a person to help students contact with different film festivals. The awards at the festival not only help students enter the film industry, but also help the school increase the popularity to attract more students to come. This will improve educational quality of students and stabilize the financial income of the school. Secondly, the film schools can provide students with rich resources related to the film industry, especially the industrial film school. Because many teachers maintain a working relationship with the film industry, students can get invaluable opportunities to work with more high-quality professionals in the film industry. This remarkable experience will undoubtedly uplift students' professional level and widen their social contacts. Thirdly, in film schools, students' friendly relationship with their teachers and classmates may allow them to help each other, and this kind of beneficial relationship may last lifelong. In addition, as this circle of relationship naturally enlarges, more and more people they will meet and know. Given that film making is an industry that relies on social contacts, the relationship with teachers and classmates at film schools will create invaluable opportunities of success and become cultural assets in the end.

At present, the industrial film schools and the independent film schools complement each other. The entrance requirements of the top industrial film schools are very high, which compels some students to go to the independent film schools. For the students whose goal is directing, there is not much difference between the two. But for the students who want to do photography, VFX or other high technical jobs, when they graduate from an independent film college, if their financial status permits, it is better for them to go to an industrial film school for a further specialized study. Since they have knowledge and experience in film production and know their specific goals clearly, it will be much easier for them to enter a top industrial film school than before.

For professional film schools, mainly in the USA and the UK, the postgraduate education accounts for the largest proportion. Students will learn specific film making techniques through concentrated professional education. The duration varies from one year to four years. Take the learning of the major of photography for example, it only takes one year, the shortest time, at Met Film School in the UK, while in the University of California, Los Angeles, it takes four years, the longest time. Normally, most film schools require two or three years to complete the postgraduate studies. Many film schools in Europe and Asia adhere to a long tradition of offering film education mainly for undergraduates. At the undergraduate level, in addition to practical courses of professional skill, there are also film theory courses, with a view to enable students to develop a holistic film concept of their own. Beijing Film Academy in Asia and The Lodz Film School in Europe both focus on the four-year undergraduate program. Particularly at the Lodz, the majors such as directing, photography, and special effects take five years by combing undergraduate studies with postgraduate studies. In addition, a small number of film schools offer doctoral education in filmmaking, such as Beijing Film Academy. Some universities also offer doctoral degree researches in visual arts and design skills related to

film production, such as Griffith University in Australia.

There are also film schools that do not offer degrees but diplomas. For example, Vancouver Film School in Canada and South Seas film and Television School in New Zealand. It should be noted that for the film schools, the lower level of credentials does not mean the lower level or poor quality of education.

The self-taught film making through the digital media

The arrival of the digital revolution has not only changed people's lives, but also changed the film industry totally. From the earliest computer CG to the digitization of the whole industrial process, the digital technology has almost changed all aspects of film production.

When paper was just invented, the price of papermaking was very high, so only a few people were able to write on paper, and only a few literary works could be handed down. In the same way, before the popularization of digital technology, film used to shoot films was very expensive. Many people with cinematic ideals had to stop at the high cost of shooting. Fortunately, the development of digital technology has changed this situation completely. Now a digital camera with shooting function can achieve good image quality. Many people can use digital technology to shoot their own films. Not only that, the film postproduction system is also completely digitized, from editing to mixing, color correction, and final output, all these works can be complete only by a computer. The development of digital technology has greatly reduced the cost of film production and created more opportunities for more people to make films.

Before the digital revolution, one of the important reasons that people went to film schools or film companies to study filmmaking was that there were expensive and professional film production equipment, which an ordinary individual could not afford. Although this phenomenon still exists today, the development of digital technology undoubtedly undermines the difference. For those who want to be directors, to participate in the film festival is their first step to become a director. They can make a film that meets the standards of most film festivals by using the civil level equipment that they can afford.

Of course, only having good equipment is not enough, a good team is more important. If one goes to a film school or a film company, the team members are often one's classmates or colleagues. But that does not mean that students cannot find a team for independent film making. In most cases, making the first independent film does not require high level techniques. For example, a person who has never been exposed to filmmaking before is not difficult to master the basic skills of using a sound recorder or a digital camera, it often needs only a very short time of training. The director can find his or her friends to participate the filmmaking, even if they have never done such things. Rather, as a director, he or she only needs to have a DSLR camera or an entry-level film camera and a good Mac or PC. Such devices are not difficult to operate, so independent film directors often do cinematography and post-production work by themselves. Sometimes there are only three or four people with versatile skills in a team, working together efficiently.

As for actors and actresses, the independent film directors and their production team have more choices. In the UK, there is a website called Mandy, which has a lot of information about amateur actors and actresses. They are basically looking for cooperation partners and will act for free. It is not difficult to find them. If there is no

website like Mandy in the country, the directors can also find the right person to act through their own social contacts. After all, people with acting dreams are all over the world, and they just lack an opportunity just like directors do.

Obviously, such an unprofessional type of team cannot make films like *Avatar* or *Pride and Prejudice*, but it is perfect for making realistic films. As the slogan of the Italian Neorealism film says, “Carrying the camera to the street”. It is a helpless yet expedient choice, but it is also a kind of aesthetic concept. With the help of digital technology, if the director and his production team have basic professional skills, they will be able to make films that can stand comparison quite happily with the films produced professionally with the film industry. The annual iPhone ads often boast of what they called professional effect. In other words, film production can be achieved with one mobile phone under specific conditions. (Currently, most mobile phones can support 4K resolution.) Every year, not all films at film festivals are shot with professional equipment. Sometimes, people win awards with their films shot by mobile phones even in Oscar. So, what kind of equipment is used for shooting is not so important, what matters is the content and creativity.

However, even if a director uses amateur equipment, he or she may need to have some professional knowledge to complete the whole process of film making. Does this still mean that people who want to engage in film creation must go to a film school or a film company? The answer is “not necessarily”. The basic film making knowledge can be obtained from reading books. Many Hollywood professional film makers write their work experience into books for publication, and the development of online education also contributes a lot to the popularization of elite film education. In China, the online courses, launched by Beijing Film Academy and the Film & Television Industry Network (<https://107cine.com>), have brought the elite education out of the former ivory tower to reach ordinary people. According to a graduate student from the Cinematography Department of Beijing Film Academy, the online courses contain all knowledge he learned in the film academy. Therefore, if we just want to acquire knowledge without other considerations, we can obtain enough knowledge from books and networks.

Conclusion

Since the birth of the film, every technological change will not only change the aesthetic characteristics of the film, but also change the educational mode of the film. In this digital era, the above-mentioned film education methods may inevitably undergo constant interaction and integration. People who are interested in the film industry can choose different ways of study on the fields they are interested in, and no doubt, they must become more open-minded and have self-taught ability and the strong perseverance to support them to face different challenges in film industry.

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