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Intellectual Video Filming - teaching philosophy through digital media production

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Intellectual Video Filming

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Curriculum vitae:

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Abstract:

Like everyone else university students of the humanities are quite used to watching Hollywood productions and professional TV. It requires some didactic effort to redirect their eyes and ears away from the conventional mainstream style and on to new and challenging ways of using the film media in favour of worthy causes.

However, it is also very rewarding to draw on the creativity, enthusiasm and rapidly improving technical skills of young students, and to guide them to use video equipment themselves for documentary, for philosophical film essays and intellectual debate. In the digital era it seems vital that students, scholars and intellectuals begin to utilize the enormous potentials of communication and reflection inherent in the production of moving images and sound.

At Roskilde University in Denmark we have a remarkable tradition of teaching documentary, video essays and video communication as project oriented group work. We also welcome international students for this unique learning experience combining traditional intellectual virtues with experimental aesthetics and modern media. The paper will present the aims, methods and results of this teaching and discuss lines of future development.

Intellectual Video Filming - teaching philosophy through digital media production

An intellectual essay debating questions of art, globalization and philosophy - could that be a video production? Or do we still in the digital era expect intellectual work to manifest itself as spoken or written words - and not as moving images with music and sound?

Video and philosophy

Some 25 years ago I took my first courses in video filming. I was at that time a very young and optimistic philosophy teacher at the university and soon imagined that this new video-media could do wonders if it was combined with philosophy in a proper and skilful manner. My idea was that video should not just be used for popular or entertaining teaching programs - not for "philosophy light" - but as a media of critical and dialectical thinking itself. So I set out to acquire the necessary skills in handling camera, microphone and editing equipment at a fairly professional level.

A few years later I was able to surprise my professor with a small video essay on the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855) and a video programme built on the book *Dialectics of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno (1944). While most of my colleagues did not like the idea of seeing video at the university at all - and even argued that the media of video and film in itself was unsuited for intellectual work and more so in strict contradiction with the content of the philosophies I tried to depict - my one supervising professor urged me to continue on this dangerous but interesting track. My youthful attempts at combining dialectics and film reminded him of Sergei Eisenstein. As I did not know my film history that well I was a bit uneasy about this comparison, but hoped that it was some sort of approval of my efforts. As I later studied the films and theories of Eisenstein a bit closer I realized it was no small compliment. And to this day I find Eisenstein to be very inspiring, not just as an important landmark in film history, but as a very relevant reference in discussing montage, aesthetics, and the production of meaning in digital screen media.

I have continued working in this borderland between filmmaking and humanism, between media experiments and intellectual, academic work. I have enjoyed the privilege of teaching philosophy, communication and video production at Danish universities, and I am presently working on just that at Roskilde University. My classes embrace both Danish students and an international programme attracting students from all over Europe and overseas.

Crossing borders by going to the movies

Indeed working with international students soon reveals one of the forces of the video media as we set the students to work on small video projects: the "language" of film is fairly international. Danish, Spanish, Italian, French, Estonian and British students have very different qualifications when it comes to expressing themselves verbally in classes, where the working language is usually English, but in general they are all very qualified and talented for expressing their ideas through images, sounds and music. I do not like to talk about a film "language", because I find it misleading and a poor analogy to think of film as similar to a set of words, but I am willing to make an exception and say that the "language" of film is very international. Of course the understanding and production of meaning in a film is not completely independent of cultural, regional and historical differences, but it is fair to say that in general moving images and the non-verbal rhetoric and aesthetic of the film form have a remarkable capacity for crossing borders, and not least in the digital and global era.

That is exactly one of the reasons why it is important that intellectuals and academics take up the challenge of exploring the possibilities of the new media in cooperation with the gifted students. And it seems to me that the students of today often find it quite natural to work in this area - which is not always the case with my older university colleagues.

At my Department of Communication the academic work is based on problem-oriented projects conducted by students in small groups. This general teaching strategy is peculiar to a few Danish universities (Aalborg University and Roskilde University), and it goes very well hand in hand with the video workshops in which we integrate practical and technical skills with more theoretical approaches to film theory and communication theory.

Soon after the first introductory sessions and exercises the students are asked to work on solving specific communication problems: they have to produce films that convey knowledge or valuable information about selected subjects - most often academic subjects - to specific users or audience groups. The focus is on acquiring the skills and methods of communicating

through the media - and the successfulness depends not on traditional standards or on an abstract taste, but is investigated through formative research, participatory design and feed-back from the relevant viewers. The aim of a video of this sort may be to bring a message across, to show something otherwise overlooked, but it may also be to stir up a discussion or to stimulate a new vision of a traditional subject. And the aim of the classes is to make the students aware of all the aspects influencing the communication processes.

The first necessary steps in teaching students to become intellectual video producers are to override some of the popular presumptions about the nature of film and about the nature of thinking. Or to be more precise: we must become clear about the vast signifying and communicative power of recording and editing, and we must become clear about the actual ways in which academic humanism, critical reflections and intellectual work can take place.

What it is to make a film

Students often meet up with expectations and ideas about video making that stem from what they themselves are used to be watching: they would like to produce something that looks like Hollywood, sounds like MTV, and is as popular as their favourite TV-show. Some are also acquainted with documentaries and art video, and some are keen on experimenting with video as part of a multimedia application event. Nowadays quite a few have tried making amateur video - and they feel embarrassed that despite their fancy new camera the result did not appear to be anyway near professional standards.

At the university the requirements for making film are not that they should be highly artistic or dramatic or good television. But what sort of film then, is it that we approve of? Rumour has it among the students that what we want to see is something in the area of documentary. Now, documentary filmmaking is often referred to as a "representation of reality" - this is even a common book title (like Bill Nichols' *Representing Reality*, 1991) but this standard phrase is most unfortunate. It presupposes, naturally, that there is such a thing as "reality" to be found - and also, quite logically, that this "reality" has already been "presented" to us: Because if not, how would it be possible to re-present it?

Thus, despite the fact that the fair intention of people trying to define the genre documentary is often just to distinguish non-fiction from fiction, this whole business soon becomes a theoretical mess. And students waste time discussing abstract truth criteria much more than the quality and the power of enlightenment and communication of a film. As an alternative to the mess

of "representation of reality" I maintain in stead a view stressing the performative aspect that *a film is always a produced and shaped presentation of something for someone by someone* - and of course appearing in a context and usually with a purpose. This goes well with both fiction and non-fiction - as does indeed the well-known dictum of John Grierson, that a (documentary) film is a *creative treatment of actuality*. In fact instead of trying to define a specific genre it is much simpler to say, that what we want the students to do, is to engage in video projects designed to communicate and to impart new insights to both the maker and the viewer. And that may sound simple, but it is a huge and important challenge.

What it is to think

In order to see the potentials of working intellectually with modern media some widespread presumptions about the nature of philosophy and critical thinking has to be reset too:

First of all it is necessary to ask whether thinking is the same as using words - which of course it is not. Concepts are essential to analytical and dialectical thinking, but concepts are not the same as words. Concepts can be indicated by different words in different languages, and the mere fact that we can discuss the problems of translation and also of formulation in our own language goes to prove, that we cannot identify thinking with verbal language. Secondly, by its very nature philosophy and academic humanism in general has to do with imagining, picturing, making sense, connecting, comparing, associating and contrasting, seeing new angles and aspects - even the metaphors of intellectual language clearly indicates that at least part of our thinking is working in ways that could be called filmic. With a camera you can show both sides of an object - and surely also two aspects of a subject. You may focus or zoom in on a scene - or a theme. In the editing process you can split a scene or an event into details - like an analysis - and through proper montage you can synthesize and produce new meanings and dialectical leaps.

Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Adorno all have very different styles of writing - and it must be fair to say that the style of their writing has some bearing on the content or on their main ideas and attitudes. Ideas and meanings have to be expressed in some form or other in order to be communicated, verbal language has a wealth of possibilities, both in oral and in written manifestations. But most of these possibilities of language work very well with video and screen media: you can simply say or write whatever you want in a video. But you can do many other additional things: you can present more than words to the audience: camera movements, cuts and wipes; and the interactions of music, pictures and graphics are adding new communicative and intellectual tools.

So it is not so that the film media as such is poorly qualified as a medium of intellectual work - in fact it includes verbal language, but has many other additional means of making sense, expressing qualities and telling stories. It is a highly qualified media for heavy thinking!

Today the paradigm of intellectual work and humanism should not be that of formal logic bordering on abstract mathematical calculus. Indeed what is needed is an awareness of what is going on in a complex and dynamic world, an ability to sense the phenomena and problems as they appear in the context of changing local and global conditions. The aesthetic and communicative forms of modern media with all their colourful and dynamic aspects are well suited for carrying on the tasks of a sensitive and sense-making humanism. Jobs in this area may not be plenty or well paid yet - but certainly there are jobs worth doing.

Also it must be clear that the nature of intellectual work is hardly to produce easy and distinct answers (that could be put in a few words), but more likely that of asking new questions, to debate and to tumble with grand problems, difficult issues bordering on ethics, politics, religion, art, history, psychology and other sciences, sometimes upsetting our normal view and making new constellations of old concepts and myths, sometimes appealing to fantasy and new visions. Critical reading is often referred to as reading between the lines, and I would like to add that video might be a very excellent media for showing us what is hiding between the lines. Both books and videos may communicate philosophy or other worthy thoughts - and the intellectual challenge and ripening process of making a video essay is no smaller than that of writing one on paper.

Workshops in intellectual filmmaking

The workshops at Roskilde are based on practical hand on experience - and after just a few instructions about how to operate the equipment the students produce their first short video programmes. Often quite viewable - but indeed it is no shame to admit mistakes as *leaning by failure* is the didactic strategy. Aspects of the recording and the editing are being discussed between the groups and mutual critique and praise are mixed with the advice of the academic supervisor and a professional technician.

The first project is usually a very basic exercise in seeing and hearing *through* the equipment, as it were. The aim is to get a new understanding of film: not just watching but producing. How do you plan, how do you go about, and how many ways are there to shape pictures and embrace sound? The students have to be very active and attentive with the

camera and the microphone in order to produce an interesting film based on something seemingly boring - i.e. without people or dramatic action - like the bare fields around the university on a winter's day. Below are some examples of actual assignments for a 3 week video workshop. Note how a philosophical theme is built into the media productions from the very beginning:

The Beauty of Winter?

Exercise 1 - the aim of the exercise is to give you an idea of how to make interesting pictures and sounds from whatever is at hand - even though it seems very ordinary and trivial!

The challenge is: make a film about "Nature today" - less than 3 minutes long. It must not contain any spoken or written texts, no voice-over, no music, no acting. All sounds and pictures must be recorded by you on location. You should have both close-up shots and wide shots, both some camera movements and some steady shots. Even within these limits try to make your film show us a certain theme or tell us a story.

The advantage of this first exercise is that it does not focus on people or acting, or on the choice of music, or on a voice-over to tell the story. It opens the eyes and ears to what can and must be done with the recording equipment: how the camera and indeed an external microphone can be moved in different ways, how an object can be framed, how considerations of light and camera angle can illuminate new aspects, as can the distance of a sound source and the interference of background noises, that are usually unnoticed, but now most annoyingly are being picked up by the microphone. And the exercise reveals to the students how infinite the possibilities are in the editing room for creating a cohesive theme or a meaningful story from seemingly senseless material.

It is not so much the pro-filmic events, the persons or objects before the camera, but rather the shaping by the camera work, by the sound engineering and by the editing process that produces the significance of the scenes and the content and meaning of a film. The form creates the content.

The Beauty of X?

Exercise 2 is about making a perfect interview portrait! The framing, the sound, the light, the composition of the pictures should be right, the editing smooth and "seem-less": titles and music jingles etc. are fine too. Within the short time of 3 minutes the film should give us a portrait of a person, especially the inner life and beauty of this person. Try to interview about the hobby, interest or secret passion of the person. Preparations may take a long time, but the film should be short and concentrated - an "inter-view" going deep!

The second exercise usually reveals to the students that a number of unspoken rules and norms shape a traditional interview - and that strange things happens, for good and for worse, if you violate some of the golden rules of thumb. But in working on the portrait the students often find that now they come to see new aspects of the character in question. Contrary to popular belief the film media is not just dealing with surfaces and factual statements, it is also dealing with the inner values, emotions and hidden agendas of the people portrayed.

What is Beauty?

Exercise 3 is the challenge of making a 5 minutes video that can be used successfully for education/debate in philosophy classes at university level. You may think of the first year of International Cultural Studies (ICS/HIB) at RoskildeUniversity as you primary target group (they have a ground course in philosophy). You may use any form, genre and means of expression that you find suitable to illuminate the classical - and still relevant - philosophical question: What is Beauty?"

Another example could be to make a video under similar conditions answering the question: What is social constructivism? Now of course it is obvious that you could try to fulfil the requirement by simply recording one or two talking heads explaining about the philosophical theme. But this is regarded by me - and usually also by the students themselves - as a too boring and too feeble attempt. It is not very filmic and - as students may say - it is not very sexy. What we want is to use the communicative and reflective powers inherent in the media. Simply to record or broadcast a lecture by some professor is not adding much to the case - indeed it usually subtracts and does not give you the feeling of being there or being involved. So the filmmaker himself/herself has to be more involved in the subject and has to try other ways of making film than just being a passive listener. This is where the challenge becomes productive: what should we film and how should we film it in order to explore and rethink an issue?

A hope for future development

Exercises of this last sort may seem to be highly abstract and intellectual, but it seems to be exactly this kind of "impossible" challenge that sparks the creativity, talent and energy of the students. And I have seen the most amazing results - ways of combining video and intellectual work that assures me that the era of digital media does not have to lack active philosophizing. It is only a matter of teaching ourselves and the intellectuals of the future to embrace the new media and their vast potentials, and to prove that *to learn how to shoot film is to learn how to see more*. To think and to address questions of our present culture, and to address the grand

questions of truth, beauty and the good life - all of this should rather be pursued by actively taking a camera in hand than by consuming the latest talk-shows and commercials.

Perhaps some will say that academic films will have a hard time competing with commercial television and Hollywood. And indeed it is hard to imagine that intellectuals in general can compete with the established film industry when it comes to popularity (luckily, on the other hand, quite a few successful directors and film-people can be regarded as truly intellectual). However, we do not normally judge the quality of academic work by its popularity or by its compliance with mainstream tendencies. Nor do we usually find our intellectual work interesting or rewarding simply by counting the number of readers or listeners. So it is not a matter of competition. What is at stake is the ability to develop the traditional analytical, critical, reflexive and creative tools of the brave minds striving for humanism and enlightenment. And to embrace and explore the intellectual powers of the new media is both a challenge and a very satisfying experience.

References

A list of publications and videos by the author, as well as further essays on related subjects can found at:

<http://akira.ruc.dk/~hjuel/>