2   0

Tweet   g+1

Preparing Students for the Future of Media

Sun 12th Apr 2015, by Rory Fellowes | Eventcoverage

On March 12th and 13th the National Film School at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) in Dún Laoghaire, with the support of Irish Design 2015 (**www.irishdesign2015.ie**), hosted a symposium of educationalists from some seventeen countries in Europe to discuss "Teaching Production Design".

The symposium was organised under the banner of the Groupement Européen des Ecoles de Cinéma et de Television (GEECT), the European Regional section of the International Association of Film and Television Schools.

Donald Taylor Black, Creative Director of the National Film School, is the Vice-Chair of GEECT and it was he who brought together this impressive meeting, with the renowned Belgian film maker Bert Beyens, the Chair of GEECT, also present for the two day conference.

Bert Beyens

Donald Taylor Black

GEECT, represented in Ireland by the National Film School at IADT, is looking ahead to future proof film school teaching practices. Some 500 students in the school are being prepared for the new world of media that is taking shape in the wave of revolutionary technology that is already changing the ways in which we make and distribute media.

Ireland has a fantastic talent base in media technologies, but still struggles on the periphery of an industry dominated by America, specifically Hollywood, and to a lesser extent, by the UK. All too many of our best practitioners have left these shores, adopting the age old Irish solution to unemployment, but we should be beckoning them back with a state of the art industry here, something for which our design and film schools are turning out a host of recruits every year.

If the example set by IADT is anything to go by, this trend is set to continue into the bright if dauntingly unknown future.

Dr. Annie Doona, President of IADT, welcomed the international audience, and then introduced the keynote speaker for the event, Professor Alex

McDowell, Production Designer, Professor of Practice at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, and Creative Director of the World Building Institute.

Professor Alex McDowell

Professor McDowell addresses the delegates at the Symposium

Professor McDowell's work will be known to many people. He was the Production Designer behind such films as "Minority Report", "Man Of Steel", "Terminal", and "Fight Club", among many other such prestigious productions. A few years ago he decided to focus on teaching. At the World Building Institute in USC he is developing new ways to create narrative structures through his World Building programme and looking at the future of the media industries, where he predicts major change.

"Why Build A Set?"

This question was the title of Professor McDowell's talk. Posing the question, he suggested that even the tradition of film sets might be up for radical reconsideration in the light of recent and coming technological developments.

Professor McDowell began by describing the methodology he and his team developed to create the Washington of 2050 for Steven Spielberg's film "Minority Report", evolving what the director himself called Future Reality, as opposed to Science Fiction. Deep research led them to consider what will happen to everything from driverless cars, high speed freeways, giant skyscrapers and urban layout, down to clothing, computing, shopping malls, service robots, non-lethal policing weapons, image projection, and even doorways. Some of these designs have inspired products that have been granted patents.

But lest the delegates should think it is all about future and fantasy worlds, he also described the designs for Terminal and Fight Club.
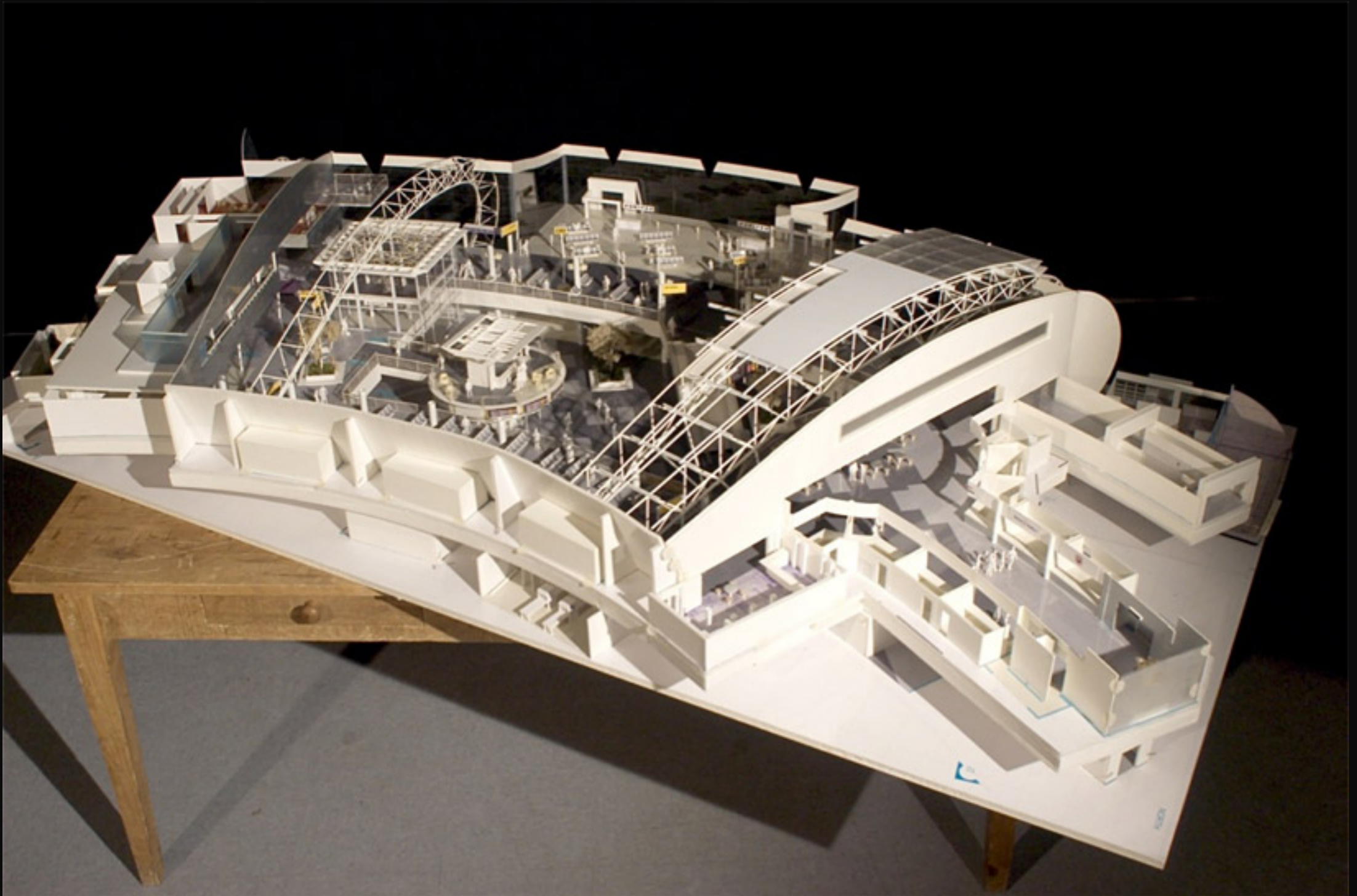
Terminal is a film set ostensibly in JFK airport outside New York, but in a time not exactly in the present, so they had to create a new airport but one recognisable to the audience as the kind of place they expect. So there was a lot of negotiation involved with companies whose products might be found in the vast mall, in redesigned outlets. Issues such as the logistics of moving a thousand extras through the set every day, and the demands such a crowd would make on the physical set had to be considered, while always allowing the director to place his cameras and lights without hindrance.

In a way his most impressive illustration of the art of production design was in the work he did for Fight Club. This would appear to be simply an old abandoned house they had found and simply dressed up a bit for the movie.

But no. In fact that house was built from the ground up. McDowell's team plotted the whole life of the house, its back story, designing it first as the house of a rich and successful business man at the turn of the last century, then through the many phases of its occupation as it and the district slowly fell into decay. The walls were covered with varied layers of wallpaper, each designed for its period, be it 1910, or 1925, or 1940 and so on up until the present day. All of the details of the set had to have a context and history, to provide the setting for an essentially fantastical story.

Providing that narrative scenario is the job of the production designer. In Fight Club, "the house," he said, "is a narrative machine."

The Art and Science of World Building

Professor McDowell made the point that all of design, all of storytelling, has to start with building the world in which the narrative is to take place, even when the world that is built is the world we live in. Any fiction writer knows this or intuitively accepts it, but it is one of those truths that are so apparent that hardly anyone acknowledges them. You need to know the back stories of the characters in order to give them depth and life, and you have to place them in a world that extends beyond the boundaries of the world that the audience sees or reads. These back stories have to be a detailed narrative but one that serves the script.

He told the audience of Production Design tutors to get ready for a major rethink. He spoke of the need to bring the virtual work of production to the inception phase in any media project. Too often, he said, VFX dictates much of the production to allow it to do its work in the ways it knows best, and yet they are essentially a post-production part of the process. In other words, the tail wags the dog.

The effect of this keynote speech was both devastating and inspiring. What might have been two days of complacent note comparing became a wide ranging debate on how to tackle the demands that future media systems will make. There was a lot of talk about cooperation and integration, and what Professor McDowell called the "mashing up" of previous conceptions of departmental segregation, even departmental definitions, to find new workflows, both in media production and, for this audience, in the methodology of teaching Production Design.

The straw of hope he offered to the assembled tutors was that the one career he saw surviving this upheaval will be Design. He signed off by telling everyone to go into the future with heads held high. "Be fearless," he said.

This inspirational opening to the symposium was followed by Liam Doona, Head of the Department of Design & Visual Arts at IADT.


Liam Doona outlined the course he runs at IADT, the Design for Stage & Screen Programme. He has already begun to shape it to take on the new challenges to the knowledge base his students will require if they are to stay in the race. Not to mention, for IADT itself to remain vital and relevant. He touched on what would be a central theme of the symposium, the need to find new ways to deal with current demarcations between the various departments of design and production, to form collaborative relationships and redefine hierarchies.

Liam Doona spoke of the need to keep up with emerging technologies. This is a tidal wave of change that is already sweeping through the media industries. Professor McDowell had already noted the emergence of Virtual Reality technologies, showing examples of Oculus Rift, the Microsoft Hololens, and the work Magic Leap are doing, as examples.

Mr. Doona referred to this in discussing the crossover of disciplines in technology. Current disciplinary training is rapidly going out of date, he warned, but he was clearly optimistic that the high level of skill in his undergraduates and their tutors is more than up to the task.
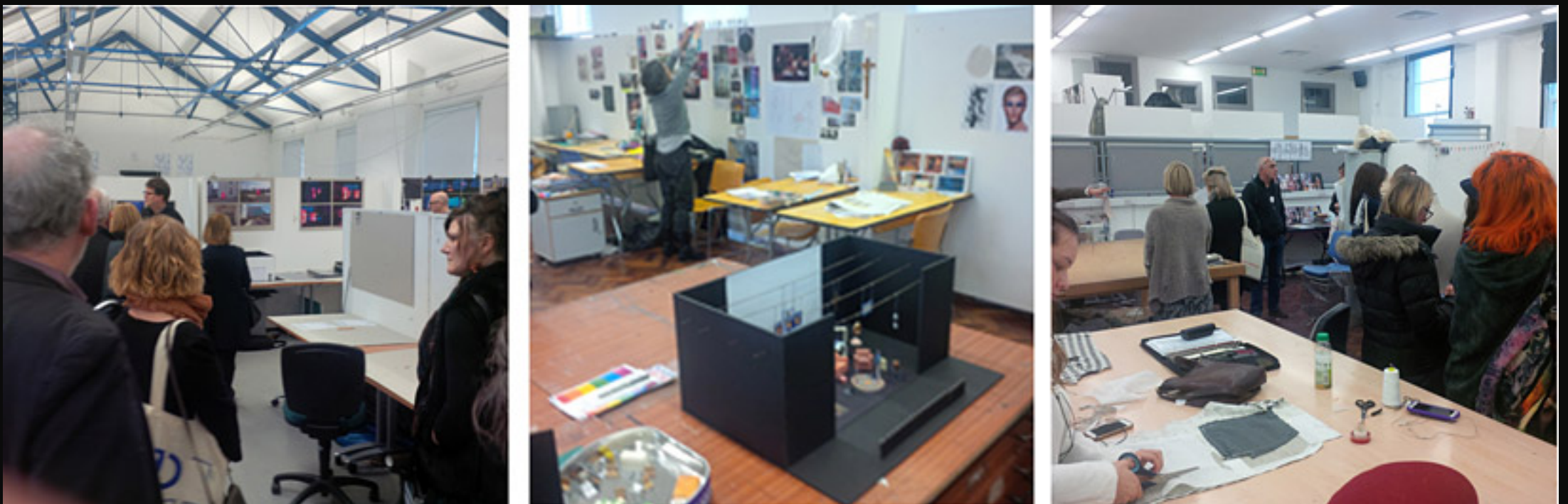
The delegates tour the National Film School departments in IADT

After a break for lunch the symposium gathered for a session entitled "Pecha Kucha Presentations". This is a format in which the various film schools represented showed a short display of slides illustrating their work with students. The concept of Pecha Kucha Presentation was devised in February 2003 by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Tokyo's Klein-Dytham Architecture (KDA).

Chaired by Jean Rice of IADT, the delegates came to the podium to make Powerpoint presentations of the work of their various schools. The range was broad and it would not be possible to go into them all here. Various teachers and professors gave their presentations, too many and too detailed to go into here, but those interested may like to take a look here.

The first day ended with a panel discussion on "Teaching Production Design to Non-Designers". Effectively, as the discussion developed, it became clear this simply meant teaching Production Design to first year students, who might have some idea of design but are not yet aware of the disciplines required, and of course, in many cases, not yet sure if they actually want to go into Production Design. The discussion was chaired by Dr. Elaine Sisson of IADT. The panel consisted of Petra Lebdušková of FAMU in Prague, Jane Barnwell, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Media Practice at the University of Westminster, and David Munns of the Arts University, Bournemouth.

After a fine dinner at Hartley's Restaurant overlooking the sea, it was my pleasure to introduce many of the guests to the joys of Powers whiskey as a chaser to good old Guinness, the best stout in the world. After several beverages, we slowly drifted off to our comfortable rooms in the Royal Marine Hotel sometime in the early hours of Friday, in the slender hope of getting enough sleep before the second day.

Day 2

The second day began with a panel discussion entitled "Production Design & VFX"

(Left to Right) Tom Conroy, Tanja Bastamow, Uli Hanisch, Michel de Graaf © Rory Fellowes 2015

The panel was chaired by the Irish Production Designer, Tom Conroy, most recently lauded for his work on "The Tudors" and "Vikings". He brought up the difficulty of working with the VFX team. This was already a theme of the symposium.

Integration and cooperation

It was in this panel discussion that the symposium began to tackle this conflict of approach. I kept silent, feeling like the only mouse in a room full of cats, as, before I moved on to writing as my sole occupation, my career was in animation and VFX. My own professional experience was much more benign than the panel and the other delegates indicated. Production Design, I would have thought, needs to have a cooperative relationship with VFX, and VFX needs to see itself as a component of the Production Design, ready to take instruction from the Production Designer. This had been the way I worked, but apparently it is not always so, in fact it is usually quite different, with VFX hardly referring to the Production Designer as they fill in the greenscreen blanks in the film. Hopefully a better working relationship can be worked out.

The eminent Production Designer Uli Hanisch, a mentor for the students of the biennial Production Design post-graduate course at IFS, Internationale Filmschule in Köln (Cologne), Germany, is renown for his work on "Perfume: The Story Of A Murderer", "The International" and "Cloud Atlas" among many others.

For this sequence, Herr Hanisch built a replica of the Guggenheim in an abandoned railway wheelhouse.

Herr Hanisch took up the theme introduced by Professor McDowell, and suggested that it may be time for film schools to look at the structure of their courses and consider how they can cross-fertilise the different departments, bringing together students from all the related disciplines in film design, including costume and VFX for a start, but including any and all that would be relevant, and thus begin to look for a new kind of professional to prepare media making for the 21st Century's demands.

He was followed by Tanja Bastamow, a tutor at AALTO University in Helsinki. Ms. Bastamov spoke of the importance of teaching production design students how to work with VFX. She was the first to warn of the need to prepare for a future of media in which even "the screen has disappeared", though this was a concept others later commented on. Clearly, she and her colleagues at AALTO University have already anticipated this. The Production Design course at AALTO University includes a short experimental module in which the students are given a task without a set goal, a three week dive into the technology to see what they can come up with. She accepted unpredictable possibilities in their work and has apparently found ways to get them out in the open. She wants to break down what she referred to as "thought barriers", to find ways to coalesce analogue and digital design methodology.

Michel de Graaf of the Netherlands Film and Television Academy was the last on the panel to describe the courses the Academy offers. His emphasis was on professionalism, on strict budget constraints and a focus on broadcast quality in the students' work. "The Future Is Now" was the familiar battle cry he used, as he acknowledged the Academy would have to reconsider the courses offered to come to grips with the new technology of production and delivery.

Best Kept Secrets

The next part of the symposium was entitled "Best Kept Secrets". This fell into two parts, and featured various tutors showing how they run their courses, with the focus on what they felt were the most enticing aspects of their courses.

First to speak was Moira Tait. She is a revered and well liked leading light in media education (and, as I discovered over supper, a thoughtful and interesting conversationalist). She is a former Head of the Department of Production Design at the National Film & Television School in the UK, where she continues to work as a part-time tutor. She also set up the Department of Production Design at the Norwegian National Film School in Lillehammer, where she remains (visiting) Professor of Production Design.

Many of the schools already use time limited courses to inspire and motivate their students, and Ms. Tait spoke of one such course that she tutors. We could all see the way she has focused the students in attention to detail with the "Take One Painting" module at NFTS, in which students are given a well known painting that they have to bring to life through production design, including VFX extensions, and camera moves to show not only the original painting but also the stories inherent in those images, all in the space of a few days.

Ms. Tait spoke of focusing on the individual, which seems to me a basic requirement of higher level education, but perhaps it is not always seen as that. She also referred to what is otherwise known as teaching as "facilitating". Students are not children and must surely arrive at film school with strong ideas or why would the school take them on, so facilitating is surely a better description of the work their tutors must do with them.

Samantha Babrovskie, Senior Lecturer in Production Design at Northern Film School in Leeds gave us her list of the seven key departments of production as she sees them, though surprisingly, her list did not include Editing, which seemed odd to me. Nevertheless, the seven she gave were well chosen, though, at this stage of the symposium, it was the kind of demarcation the whole two days had been trying to reconfigure. Maybe her module will change in coming semesters.

A moment of light relief was provided by Jean-Vincent Puzos, Head of the Production Design Department at La Fémis in Paris. He asked the film industry's often repeated question, Do we need Directors? He illustrated his point by likening the role of the Production Designer to that of a guide dog, leading the "blind" director through the sets. This spoke to the heart of the discussion but also had the audience laughing out loud as, in the best tradition of Jacques Tati, he mimed the director being led this way and that by the designer. And by the way, it was generally accepted that indeed we do need a Director to pull a production together, maybe even more so now that the definition of a production is widening to include all sorts of new ways of constructing a media event, be it Film, Transmedia, Television, Commercials, VR, and so on (ad, quite possibly, infinitum).

A slightly left field ending to these presentations came from Professor Sergey Ivanov of the Russian State University of Cinematography in Moscow, also known as the Gerasimova Institute of Cinematography.

He showed the assembled audience several extracts from Fedor Bondarchuk's epic film "Stalingrad" (2013). It looks like a splendid production, no doubt, and Professor Ivanov told some terrifying facts, inasmuch as there were no VFX used in the shots he showed the audience.

This is mainly a VFX trailer for the film, but the shot of the men in flames running out of a huge explosion, still firing at the Germans (a true incident) was shot live, with practical FX and actors. The Professor shocked everyone further when he quoted the director, who apparently called out after every take "Is everyone still alive?"

There was, it has to be said, no mention of students or of the work of the University, but it was a grand demonstration all the same. And besides, when we had all repaired to the bar at the hotel later, the good professor went around refilling everyone's glass from a bottle of whiskey he had bought, so how could we complain? It ended the two day gathering in true Russian fashion.

The Symposium itself ended with a closing panel session chaired by Marc Nicolas, the Directeur Général of La Femis in Paris. Moira Tait, Alex McDowell and Liam Doona joined him to try and sum up what had been discussed and what had been discovered and to summarise the proposals we had heard for the courses to be offered to students of Production Design and its associated skills.

What about Animation?

Coming from a career in animation and VFX I was somewhat disconcerted that during all of the two day Symposium, not one person mentioned

production design in animation. It was already clear a lot of the film schools represented had only just begun to come to grips with the rise of VFX as a means to enhance the scope of film with impressive set extensions and unexpected shots, following that artillery shell as it flies into the house in the Stalingrad video, or the crashing German bomber, and so forth. Bu these things are done by animators along with programmers. And there is still a very lively industry in what we might call cartoon animation, from the 3D work of the major Hollywood studios, to the works of such 2D studios as Cartoon Saloon in Ireland, or the claymation of the UK's Aardman Studios to name but a few.

These productions all need Production Designers as much as Live Action movies do, but none of the tutors made any mention of it. The National Film School at IADT teaches animation, both 2D and 3D, as we saw on our tour of the school, so I mention this omission in the hope that Animation Production Design might also get a fresh look from the tutors, along with all the other eloquently and vehemently discussed aspects of Production Design that came to the fore in this extensive and very entertaining Symposium.

Into the future

These gatherings of like-minded people can so easily become little more than a backslapping, self-congratulatory, inward looking indulgence, but it was clear to me and I think everyone there, that real ground had been covered, new thoughts and ideas had been generated, and a bright spirit of adventure engendered in the delegates.

We are living in times of considerable change and unpredictable outcomes and it was pleasing to see these guides for future generations in their chosen field set aside any laurels they might claim, to look with hard attention and selfless dedication to what it will take to earn those laurels in future.

The delegates at the Teaching Production Design Symposium assemble outside at the end of the conference

A Full List of the Delegates at the Teaching Production Design Symposium at IADT 2015

The full booklet that went with the Symposium can be found and downloaded from the IADT website here

Other Links:

http://worldbuilding.institute/

http://www.iadt.ie/en/

The CGSociety

The CGSociety is the most respected and accessible global organization for creative digital artists. The CGS supports artists at every level by offering a range of services to connect, inform, educate and promote digital artists worldwide.

MORE ABOUT US ⊙

Learn

CGWorkshops

CGTODs

Forums

CGWiki

Create & Share

CGPortfolio

CGChallenge

Forum

Call for entries (BSW)

Discover

Galleries

CGFeatures

CGJobs

Shop

CGConnect

Ballistic Publishing

Social

Facebook

Twitter

Google+

Linkedin

Company

About

Contact

Privacy

Advertising

g+1　0　　Pin it