

TRIANGLE CONFERENCE

A CILECT/GEECT PROJECT REALISED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ENTE CINEMA-ROMA
WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE MEDIA PROGRAMME-TRAINING
Rome-December 9th - 14th 1996.

Sixty delegates from twenty-eight film schools and four related training institutions gathered in Rome on December 9th for the Triangle Conference organised by the executive committee of GEECT. The theme of the Conference was an examination of the collaborative, "three-sided" relationship between the writer, director and the producer, and the integration of training for all three roles within the curriculum for film and television training.

It was the largest gathering of practising teachers ever assembled to examine a single, specific topic in film education. The GEECT initiative was supported by Ente Cinema in Rome who hosted the event at the CINECITTA' studio complex, and the costs of the Conference were funded partially by the MEDIA II-TRAINING programme. Other partners were Quantel Ltd/Newbury, Ateliers du Cinéma Européen/Paris, University of Westminster/London and CILECT/Bruxelles.

Twenty-two of the participating schools were members of the GEECT regional group. They were joined by delegates from Brazil, Ghana, Mexico, Singapore and the United States.

Underlying this GEECT project, one of the four projects of the current CILECT biennium, was the belief that the producer, writer and director - always the initiators of any film - must learn how to collaborate more effectively in order to create a viable product. It was hoped that the Conference conclusions would point to key, common values and highlight contrasting attitudes that cannot be found in a single school.

The working process of the Conference provided an effective model for this research.

Day One concentrated on "*The relationship between Writer and Director*". The professional model was drawn from Italian cinema, where tradition has established the collaboration between two or more writers and the director in the development of a single script. The morning panel was distinguished: Suso Cecchi d'Amico (writer), Mario Monicelli (writer and director), Vincenzo Cerami (writer) and Gianni Amelio (director).

Day Two examined "*The relationship between Director and Producer*". The industrial model was from Britain, presented by the University of Westminster. It took into consideration the role of the major television networks as key players in the development of feature film production. Film director Stephen Frears, and Mark Shivas, Head of Film at BBC, took part. They reflected on the relationship of the broadcasters to film makers, and the significance of story editors in the development process.

Day Three was occupied with a consideration of "*The relationship between Producer and Writer*". This interaction, particularly in the development stage of production, is growing in significance in Europe, helped by a number of initiatives of the MEDIA II programme. ACE in Paris offered the day's model with Colin Young, the former director, now senior consultant, and Ed Guiney of Ireland, producer of "*Guiltrip*" providing the case study.

An additional component of the morning discussion was a review of French marketing and distribution methods, which contain certain safeguards to maintain a minimum audience level for local film production.

Fabienne Vonier (producer) and Francis Boespflug (distributor) of Gaumont, Paris presented an overview of that strategy.

Day Four was devoted to “*The new languages of the image*”, and gave delegates an opportunity to review state of the art technology in relation to film production. Quantel demonstrated the Domino image enhancement and special effects system. Speakers were Steve Shaw (product manager for Domino, Quantel/Newbury) and David Bush (manager, Interactive/Milan). Later delegates toured Cinecittà’s Cineon installation. Finally, the session closed with a sneak preview of C.A.T.S. Computer Aided Theatrical Score - an up-coming computer programme for “virtual storyboarding” - introduced by Gilberto Tofano and Patrizia Palamidese. In each of these encounters, the speakers stressed the collaborative and creative potential of new technology when the producer and director join the engineer. As one speaker put it: “It is the mind behind the machine that gives it its capabilities”.

Day Five was aimed “*Towards new curricula*”, and looked at three models of curricula which integrate producer training at graduate level : The Peter Stark Producing Program at the University of Southern California, presented by its chairman Lawrence Turman ; the Opera Prima feature production company of Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica in Mexico City, presented by its sub-director Andrea Gentile ; and the Academy of Theatre, Cinema and TV in Budapest presented by the head of Film and Tv Dept. János Zsombolyai.

Each afternoon, the delegates divided into groups representing specialist teaching in one of the three disciplines under review, in order to discuss ideas raised by the morning presentations. These sessions concentrated on concepts of collaboration within the three disciplines, curricula development, and teaching methodology.

On Day Six, before the final session, each group reported the following summary of their findings to the delegates.

- Report 1 : WRITING GROUP
by Caterina d’Amico, GEECT and CSC/Rome

It is not easy to present a structured resume of the writers’ group discussion. There were lots of ideas put forward and many problems were identified, but the outcome is not very structured. That is probably because writers make stories, they don’t make structures.

Certainly one of the unifying elements of this group was the clear notion of the story as being of central importance for any kind of film. In spite of this, writers generally have a slight feeling of being marginalised. The screenwriter generally feels that his role is not after all strong enough, not recognised enough.

In some way, this is also reflected in the training of screenwriters. For example, in some schools the programme for the writer-students is shorter than for other specialisations. In some schools, training for writers is a very recent innovation. For example, the course at the Royal College of Art has only just been put in place this year. In the Rome school, the writers’ course was added only around eight years ago. In some other schools, screenwriting is taught only as a part of the Directing course. Inevitably, our group of writing teachers felt that if, as they presumed, there was general agreement that story-telling and screenwriting were the central points of a film, the teaching of those skills was not given enough attention in most schools.

This failure of the teaching process can be seen in two vital areas -- the development of the project and the realisation of the project.

The great problem arises when the story, which is the material from which the film is made, is not ready to be filmed. The student - and maybe his/her teacher - often feels responsible for holding back all the other students. For students in other disciplines cannot work without a script, even for the most rudimentary exercises. The writer, struggling to polish the script, has the feeling that he or she is delaying the editors, DOPs, sound people, the director.... This feeling of time pressure means that ultimately, some scripts that are not ready for production get made. It is a question of time.

When this happens, tutors often remark: "Well, it happens also in real life. When you need to start shooting, you shoot, even if the script is not ready. This happens in the industry; and so why not in schools?" But of course, schools exist to perfect skills, not to perpetuate bad habits. And we feel that it is not helping the students to let them go into production with something that you, as a teacher, are not convinced has merit.

This is one major problem we identified. We heard how some schools cope with such issue. We heard of one or two schools for instance, with a strict ruling that if the script is not ready, it simply doesn't get made. The students affected by this decision take an already prepared script -- probably one that has been made before -- and they use it as an exercise drama.

We heard and recognised another problem. The case of a script that is good, but no student in the school wants to make it. We traced this problem to the old conflict between the writers and the directors in schools. We all know the battle with directors who refuse to shoot a script they have not written themselves. We all recognise the defence they put forward: "I don't like it. I'm not interested. I don't want to do it". So the screenwriting department can have a pile of good scripts that are sitting there and nobody uses them. It is a double faced problem. We were told of other schools that take scripts from the writers, and give them to students in other departments to develop further.

But we looked beyond problems of status and relationships. We discussed practical exercises.

There was a shared view, expressed often in this conference, that screenwriters should have a fuller experience of the film-making process. Therefore they should learn how to be assistant directors or even better, to develop skills working on script continuity. For instance, writers who follow the entire process of film making achieve an enhanced awareness of timing. They learn not only how much time is needed to set up a certain scene that he/she has written, but also how much time it will occupy in the film. Everyone in the writers' discussion group agreed that screenwriter students should be employed in other production roles as part of their curricula.

This concept of an enhanced curriculum was taken further. It was agreed that writers should be given the possibility to work with actors. This already happens in many schools, so we were able to share some of the different exercises that are used.

We approved of one exercise in which two writers work on a dialogue scene together. Each writes a character. Each is therefore the voice of a character. When they have written the dialogue, actors from outside the school take this dialogue and rehearse it themselves. Then they stage the scene and use it to teach the students the flaws in their writing. That exercise gives the students, often for the first time, contact with the spoken word instead of the written word.

Another member of the group said that in his school they use a different exercise. Each writer writes a whole scene, and then directs the actors in a performance of the scene. Therefore the writers stage what he or she has written. The actors are required first to perform the scene as they have been directed, but then to perform it in different ways. This version teaches the writer that many interpretations are possible inside any dialogue. He/she learns that the written word can be seen and transformed simply by delivering the lines in different ways.

Another exercise involved only one actor. All the screenwriters were required to write a scene for him/her. In this way, the students learn to use the potential characteristics they perceive in the actor.

There were several other types of exercises. The need was stressed time and again, for students to be encouraged as much as possible to deal with reality. Therefore, we agreed: "Send them out.. send them into the streets.. Give them specific tasks that require them to go there and report back". Students should be told to go to a specific place with their eyes wide open. They should spend a week there and come back with characters, ideas and observations. We all felt that this exercise would give every student at least a starting point for a story.

Several people considered that working in groups was a good experience. To work in a group in this context does not mean to write in groups. Actually nobody spoke about the potential of writing in groups. However, we heard reports of working methods that included groups of up to six screenwriters. Each develops his/her own script, then the scripts are discussed by the group together. Each student offers opinions and ideas, and therefore participates in the development of a project written by somebody else. This experience not only gives the individual writer a first reaction from a potential audience (and therefore some early feed-back to help improve the script) but it is also an educational process for every student taking part. It is easier to spot mistakes in other people's work. And therefore the student learns to develop the habit of the critical eye with his/her own material. This exercise teaches students to become more aware of what they write.

These were samples of the type of exercises we shared. We all agreed there would be great benefit for teachers -- and therefore students -- if a comprehensive collection could be compiled.

Apart from identifying problems and discussing teaching methodology, the writers' group shared some complaints as well.

We considered that in many schools there was often little involvement in the writing process by the other departments, especially producers. The lack of a proper producer role had an adverse impact in many cases. In too many schools, producers - who are usually regarded as production managers - only come in at a very, very late stage, when everything is ready for pre-production. They think they have to wait for the finished script before their work begins. We suggest it would be better for them to follow the whole process, working in parallel with the writers to advise on potential problems of realisation.

We also discussed the need for more attention to be paid to script analysis. However, we noted the almost universal difficulty of obtaining current scripts. Too frequently, students can read a script only some time after a film is finished. It would be more relevant to know the script that gave birth to the movie, in order to compare it at first viewing. It would be extremely valuable to analyse the finished film. We recommend that schools, as a group, negotiate some form of copyright arrangements in order to have access to these scripts earlier.

One case study we noted came from the National Film and Television School at Beaconsfield in Britain. It outlined how a project is developed. First the writer and the producer are asked to work together to identify an idea for a story, for a plot line. When they come back with this story idea, the idea is reviewed by a production board. If the idea is considered worthy, the writer and producer are told to find a director. When they acquire a director they think is right for the project, then only the writer and the director continue to develop the idea. The producer takes a less active role in the actual writing process. In this way, the individual attachment to the story is divided. This process helps to overcome the problem familiar to most schools, of the initiator of the story feeling he/she is the owner of it. It confronts in a professional manner the unrealistic attitude of many students who feel that any intervention is violating something that is already perfect in itself. Put simply, shared story development tends to suggest that the story already belongs to two people. Therefore both feel less rigidly attached to it. Then, when a third partner (the director) joins the equation, one of the original duo steps aside, leaving the writer and the director to develop the story together. Inevitably the final version of the script will have already lost some elements of the original and gained others. So it is already modified. So the ownership is even more vague. Finally, the NFTS model places a new responsibility on the producer who, alone, has to present the script and convince the School that it is a good project.

This was felt by the group to be a very good model. It allowed each project to attract a specific group in such a way that no one student can assume a proprietary role. The project is led by the story. It is the outcome of the work of three people fulfilling three discrete roles. They serve that aim and not their personal egos.

Finally, a reflection on the title of our conference. It was pointed out that our creative triangle is, in itself, one of the three edges of another, bigger triangle, which represents the movie, the finance that the movie attracts and the audience. Or to put it another way -- there is the money which is the origin of the movie, there is the movie, and then its ultimate destination, the audience. Another delegate suggested that inside our creative triangle there are other triangles. I like that very much. So I see that this picture that we have offered to the discussion is multiplying endlessly inside and outside. And I am very glad.

- **Report 2 : DIRECTING GROUP**

by Rolf Orthel, GEECT and NFTVA/Amsterdam

Courses for directors, often in conjunction with screenwriting classes, are central components in virtually every school curriculum, and have been established and refined over many years. Therefore, the growing trend to develop a new programme for the training of producers must be perceived as an intrusion by many students. In the old system of film education, the director and the writer/director student ruled like young kings. Producers, they thought, were not to be trusted.

One colleague summed up this view. He simply could not grasp why so many schools today were prepared to give such importance to the training of producers-to-be. He thought such a profound change would ultimately lead to middle-of-the-road films made only for profit, with the attributes one might too readily think to be the key to success.

These views led to an observation about "age and angst". Student directors needed to learn that co-operation leads to a better understanding of his or her own qualities - or lack of them. Then the student would come to realise that colleagues do not condemn "holes" in his or her talent, but to

contribute to filling the gaps, thus stimulating each other to make the project a better project, the film a better film.

Co-operation is not a method of working which diminishes the participants, but is a strong force directed towards a common goal. Therefore it can help overcome initial angst -- especially for younger students. It was pointed out that some schools have students only 18 or 19 years of age.

These reflections led the group to a discussion of ways to overcome an initial lack of communication between the three disciplines within schools. This became an important issue in the dialogue. Students had to be helped to get to know each other, and to discover unimagined qualities and skills they could contribute.

Various methods and exercises were described:

1. A non-verbal exercise in which one protagonist has to use action to attract the attention of another character. This is a simple play designed to make students accustomed to communicating with each other.
2. Psychodrama was used in a similar manner, but at a higher level. This process has been the subject of at least one special study.
3. A similar psychodrama was used in one school, but not only with the aim of revealing the students' characters and capabilities. After the exercise was completed, lessons in story-telling were presented, and elements from the psychodrama experience were used to inspire proposals for some (very) short films.
4. In many schools, interview techniques are being taught. Students interview each other, thereby acquiring not only a useful skill, but also relevant knowledge about each other. Thus the students learn each other's ideas, attitudes and interests that can be the basis for future projects. Interviewing as a learning tool also has other merits. When used for research, the students test the strength of their own determination and commitment towards the project.
5. Another exercise, also designed to stress the importance of communication, moves further towards a precise story-telling goal. Students are given a familiar situation - for example, the morning after a party. There are still the dirty glasses lying around, and full ashtrays. The students are given one or two lines of dialogue to get them started. The situation and the dialogue seem to centre on a sense of chaos. In fact, the exercise is called "Chaos". The students learn that by reasoning and the use of imagination, dramatic order and some logic can be created from the lines and the situation in which they find themselves. Students learn to add "why" to "who" and "where". In other words, they find meaning through collaboration. "Chaos" is primarily a creative exercise, in which the students learn to use logic collectively to solve a particular narrative problem.
6. Another exercise has been designed to illustrate practical ways to avoid chaos in film making. It stresses an understanding of the various roles in the collaborative process. We know how often students want to carry out all the jobs on a film set. They transgress the accepted boundaries of their respective roles, be it director, assistant director, cameraperson, cinematographer, production manager or the assistant producer and so on. The students are given a simple three-minute script, and assigned specific roles. The script is filmed in a day. Then the roles are changed and the script is filmed again and again, until every student has experienced all the jobs required to realise a film.

In the discussing these exercises, the group realised the importance of two specific techniques of learning - repetition and observation.

a) Repetition: To carry out an exercise only once can be almost a waste of time. This can be especially true when the aim of the exercise is more than a mere technical subject, like rigging lights. Even in such cases, repetition is helpful to some students. But should the exercise be more complex, such as those outlined above, each repetition is slightly different. Often repetition produces a steady evolution towards refinement. But such repeated exercises should be carried out as a continuous experience. Knowledge is lost if too much time elapses between the exercises and the time when it is put into practice.

The group agreed that the most effective learning and teaching methodology involved many short exercises, rather than “major” productions. Often the pressure of producing the annual “real” films in a student’s 2nd or 3rd year or final year obstructs the process of learning. Special mention was made of discussions currently under way at the NFTS at Beaconsfield. There, the faculty are considering reducing the number of films made by students from 3 to 2 in order to enable teaching to be more effective.

b) Observation: Even with enhanced concentration on exercises, consideration needs to be given to the pre-occupation with the “hands-on” experience. The group questioned whether doing it yourself was always the best method, particularly if the student involved may never need to demonstrate such skills again in his career. Does a producer student really need to direct a short film? Opinion was divided. The opportunity to repeat an exercise as argued above means the student learns to do better, to make less mistakes than before. But the real-world relevance of the experience might be better achieved by allowing the student to observe a number of short films being made, from which he or she reports on specific elements directly related to their chosen discipline.

Finally, the group listed a number of other issues they recognised, but did not have time to discuss. The key question? What elements of the directors’ programme should be experienced by the writing students and/or the producing students? And vice versa.

- Report 3 : PRODUCERS’ GROUP

by Dick Ross, GEECT and NFTS/Beaconsfield

It is a truism well known to those of us who have attended teachers’ conferences in the past that delegates are stimulated and enlightened in direct proportion to the amount of effort and commitment they contribute themselves to the group exchanges. As you give, so shall you receive.

The delegates who formed the group discussing current trends in the education of would-be producers were fortunate. Amongst us were representatives of a number of schools who came with a specific and well-focused purpose -- to take away a whole range of ideas and attitudes to the establishment of a full, professional level course for producers for cinema and television. Our colleagues from Ghana, Finland and Singapore are all in the process of establishing new course structures that will include the training of producers. They kept us concentrated on core concerns.

As with other groups, our discussions revealed a wide range of attitudes to teaching. There are those who are content with what they have already in place in the curriculum. There are those who have decided that they already have a superior programme in place and do not need to refine it. There are those who know they are just at the beginning, and want to expand their courses in line with current practice. There are even those with some experience who want to share it. Every attitude represents a contribution, the negative as well as the positive. Perhaps we should worry less

about teaching how to learn, than learning how to teach. Training the trainers is, after all, a current buzz word.

Inevitably when we began, we clearly felt the whole topic was too wide. We spent our first session explaining what we taught in our respective academies, and how producer training fitted into the over-all scheme.

We exchanged information about the in-house conflicts that come when a school tries to complete the triangle by adding producer training to the core disciplines of writing and directing. The writer/director courses have been in place, in most cases, ever since the huge explosion in the number of film schools in the 1960s. Producer training, with very few exceptions in North America, is a discipline only ten years old. Therefore, it is still defining - and refining itself.

This brings me to the first of the concerns we identified. It mattered to some of us more than others. This was the problem of definition. It stems from the numerous references to the "auteur" approach. As if to claim some credit for the content of films for which they were responsible, producers seem to need the appendage of "creative" as a symbol of validation.

We looked at - and will continue to reflect on:

1. The role of the producer as a creative contributor, a creative entrepreneur, a businessman, a film maker, an enabler.
We felt the problem lies in the popular misconceptions of the role and function of the producer. There appears to be a need to downplay -- or at least realign -- the concept of the producer as businessman.
2. We acknowledged and began to examine the nature of collaboration and co-operation between all three sides of the triangle. It is clear that some of us still see the introduction of producers' courses as something of an interruption, or an imposition on top of a perfectly happy partnership of writer and director, or even of writer/director. Either way, we know that we need to give a lot more thought to the smooth integration of this need "breed" into the corral. One useful phrase used during the week is relevant. "The collective thought of the story-teller".
3. This brought us to some consideration of the selection process. This is fertile ground for further study. We felt that *how* we chose students is perhaps less of a question than *why* we chose students - or any particular student. We discovered that the selection process can range from an application form and an interview, to a six month-long process. Some schools use a points or grading system, others rely on gut reaction.
4. Then there is the balance within the curriculum of training for film making versus television. We cling, in the main, to the idea of training for the cinema. Yet television and video is where most of our graduates will go -- at least at first. Our colleague from INPUT reminded us of the need to enhance the broadest possible training in depth (if that's not a contradiction) in television in all its forms. To this end he felt that enhanced study of genre in television would be crucial.
5. Our reflections in this area then turned to practical considerations of the nature of exercises which placed the student producer in an alliance with directing and writing students. We agreed that the relationship in most schools does not merely happen naturally. This is certainly true of schools with newly introduced courses.
We would like to compile a compendium of exercises not necessarily to represent the "perfect" teaching model but rather to enliven our production practice. We acknowledged that all of us have many marvellous ideas for demonstrating skills and gaining experience but we also have some which could do with refurbishment.

6. We believe that the integration of the Producers Course will ultimately signal a policy for change in the industry. This was particularly true for European cinema. We identified a serious malaise common to many European countries. We considered that the failure of so many films made nationally could be laid at a number of root causes:
- a) Rushing into production after too short a pre-production period. The failure of a producer to have an input into the development process.
 - b) The need to spend production subsidies and other finance within a given period.
 - c) Major finance committed to film design and the production period, at the expense of the development stage.
 - d) The failure of the producer to be heavily committed in the post-production period particularly in relation to marketing, publicity and exhibition.

We noted the need for schools and academies to foster moral and ethical attitudes as well as trust within the institution in relation to actual productions. The student producer needs to be taught a sense of responsibility possibly above, or even than greater than, that required in the industry.

That lead us to another area which needs further elaboration. That is the erecting of safe guards between our individual institutions and student film production in general. It could be said that one role of the student producer is to safeguard the reputation of the institution. This requires enhanced teaching of legal matters, insurance guarantees and so on. Many schools appear weary of allowing student producers to take full command of productions for fear of repercussions associated with failure.

Failure as a teaching tool was also considered. We regretted the growing preoccupation with "success", and reflected that the student often learns from a magnificent failure than a mediocre success.

Success however brings it own rewards - and often many headaches. We think there is a need for clarification of a range of internal relationships regarding the division of profit from student films distributed and sold, points systems for student films, contracts with distributors, and various models of internal production companies through which schools currently launder sales and profits.

Two final points :

1. We were impressed by and grateful for the grace and generosity of our American colleagues who conferred upon so many of our efforts praise for the quality of our films. We had a wonderful idea. Perhaps we should make the films and they should sell them.
2. We propose to explore some mechanism by which those of us capable of inspiration can continue our work begun here. A week is not long but we have made a start.

Somebody observed early on in the conference that we seemed to have many answers but no questions. We all know that in a screenplay to offer answers but leave the audience with no questions is a recipe for failure. In the debate of the last few days I think we came to realise that.

For the final session of the Conference, the composition of the discussion groups was changed to a mix of all three disciplines. Their group reports pointed the way to the structure of the TRIANGLE Workshop. It was summed up by one spokesman: "We won't find one solution.. but many approaches".

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- Mr. Donald Lee Weng Sun - Teacher, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore
- Mr. Ng Say Yong - Teacher, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore
- Mr. Victor T. Valbuena - Head of Film and Media Studies Dept., Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore

SWITZERLAND :

- Mr. Pierre Aghte - Director, Fondation de Formation Continue pour le Cinéma et l'Audiovisuel, FOCAL, Lausanne

US :

- Mr. John Furia jr - Writer, Producer and Teacher, University of Southern California USC, Los Angeles

SPEAKERS

- Ms. Suso Cecchi d’Amico (writer)
- Mr. Mario Monicelli (writer and director)
- Mr. Vincenzo Cerami (writer)
- Mr. Gianni Amelio (director)
- Mr. Stephen Frears (director)
- Mr. Mark Shivas (producer, Head of Film at BBC/London)
- Mr. Colin Young (founding director and senior consultant of A.C.E./Paris)
- Mr. Ed Guiney (producer, Temple Films/Dublin)
- Ms. Fabienne Vonier (producer, Pyramide/Paris)
- Mr. Francis Boespflug (distributor, Gaumont/Paris)
- Mr. Steve Shaw (product manager for Domino, Quantel/Newbury)
- Mr. David Bush (manager, Interactive/Milan)
- Mr. Gilberto Tofano (theatre and film director, exploitation manager of C.A.T.S./Pisa)
- Ms. Patrizia Palamidese (director of computer visualisation dept., CNUCE-CRN/Pisa.)
- Mr. Lawrence Turman (producer, director of the “Peter Stark” Producing Program, U.S.C./Los Angeles)
- Ms. Andrea Lucia Gentile (sub-director of production dept., C.C.C./Mexico City)
- Mr. János Zsombolyai (head of film and tv dept., Színház-es Filmművészeti Főiskola/Budapest)