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## Conference Report : First National Student Film and Video Festival : Two Views

The First National Student Film and Video Festival ever to take place in South Africa was organized by the Rhodes University Department of Journalism and Media Studies from 15-18 July, 1981. This event included, as its main thrust, a conference. Participants were invited from the wider educational community (both lecturers and students), including schools, Technikons and universities. In the pages which follow we have presented two views of the conference. The first is offered by Johan Grove, who has been responsible for the introduction and development of media studies at specific schools falling under the jurisdiction of the Transvaal Education Department (TED). The second view is that of the co-ordinators of the Festival.

### View One : Theory or Practice?

Johann Grove

#### 1. DIFFICULTIES HIGH-LIGHTED BY THE FESTIVAL

##### Theory or Practice?

As already indicated in Chapter Two of my recently completed thesis on Film study(1), there is, as yet, no agreement on the ideal CONTENT of Film Courses:

A Film School cannot produce the technicians, script-writers, actors, directors and theorists necessary to make a good film:

The films shown at the Festival, produced by the various Film Schools in the country, were no more than exercises: not one Good Film was shown. Some films were technically very acceptable, others contained some good ideas, but each contained more imperfections than perfections. (One lecturer remarked that we really had very little to celebrate at the Festival).

The issue raised here is what the function of a Film School should be. The Universities felt that the emphasis should be placed on film theory and film criticism, while the Technicons preferred the emphasis to be placed on the training of film technicians. Both types of institution acknowledged the need for some kind of balance between the theory and practice of film making.

### The Need to Establish Teaching Criteria

It was agreed that a clear set of criteria in terms of which course content could be devised and student performance evaluated must be agreed upon. Such co-ordination is essential for the subject to establish itself at the tertiary level of education.

The problem of defining the status, and therefore the training of film technicians is also very real.

### The Lack of Suitable Models Available to Students

As a result of State intervention in the arts, potential film makers among our students have no models on which to base their own work. They have no notion of how to depict the multi-racial society in which they live, exposed as they are to imported material, or to innocuous South African-made renderings of an all-white community at work or at play, in which occasional Africans might, or might not, be seen in menial positions.

The only valid model available to and emulated by our students is that of violence. The film of violence - physical or psychological - is, in consequence, the genre most frequently, and most effectively opted for by our students.

The cost of film making, which is in excess of R100,00 per minute, is a further constraint. Students find it understandably difficult to make an adequate ten-minute filmic statement, fed as they are on a diet of 100-minute plus feature films.

## 2. THE FORMAT OF THE FESTIVAL

### An Inordinate Emphasis on Film-As-Product

The organisers had decided - possibly unwisely as it turned out in the event - to focus on the Film and Video productions made by the institutions represented at the Festival.

There was a strong and fairly general feeling, at the close of the Festival, that a much stronger emphasis should have been placed on the close theoretical analysis of specific films, or of sequences from the films shown. Only in this way would it have been possible to identify - and hence to remedy - some very glaring deficiencies, and for the film makers to have learnt from their experience. The few minutes allowed for informal - and quite unstructured - discussion after the screening of each film is certainly the single most serious flaw in the structuring of the conference.

It was my distinct impression that some of the film makers present at the conference were unable - because of inadequate training in the area of

film theory and semiotics - to offer the kind of criticism called for by occasions such as these.

An interesting phenomenon was the unexpectedly high quality of films made by secondary school pupils working at the Young Film-makers Workshop in Cape Town. These pupils receive no formal theoretical training, yet produce films with a clear narrative line, often containing humour. Possible explanations of this anomaly might be

the spontaneity of unencumbered youth, as opposed to the "identity crisis" so often experienced by the student in his late adolescence,

the inhibiting and disorienting effect of formal lectures, which kills spontaneity and promotes incipient (but as yet unfocussed) cerebral activity at the expense of natural impulse.

the unpretentious themes which the pupils are set to explore. They are explicitly required to base their films on their own, personal experience. (It is of interest that many films are based on the model of the television commercial - a point which can be related to the absence of adequate models for self analysis available to the older student film-maker at tertiary level).

### Theoretical Considerations

The standard of the lectures varied considerably, from loosely-structured talks outlining the courses open to students at individual institutions to very concise statements of specific curricular approaches and a lucid enunciation of the role of university-trained students of film in the community.

Some four undergraduate students from the University of the Witwatersrand read formal papers which demonstrated the very considerable scope and depth of their academic study of the media.

The series of two formal lectures devoted to an analysis of Breaker Morant, the South African premier of which served as introduction to the Festival, were, unfortunately, devoted to an historical/social analysis of the authenticity of the film, in the course of which the stereotypes perpetuated in the film were analysed. It was felt that this time could much more profitably have been devoted to an analysis of purely cinematic issues.

### 3. CONCLUSION

#### Implications for Film Study within the TED

The difficulties and problems identified in the course of the Festival served to confirm the validity of the approach to Film Study adopted in the TED Pilot Course on Film, undertaken by the Education Bureau during 1975 to 1979. Here the emphasis is firmly placed on an aesthetic-theoretical-critical analysis of prescribed film, the purpose of which is to cultivate and foster critical viewing in a media audience. Film-making, the hands-on experience of equipment, is encouraged but not insisted upon as essential, because of its value in enhancing and refining the critical faculty.