

PANNING THE HORIZON: THE EVOLUTION OF GEECT'S VISIONS PROJECT

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In April of this year, the Visions 3 workshop for European documentary students met in Bratislava to critique its current crop of works-in-progress, and I was struck again by how much the project has evolved from its beginnings in 1994. Teaching Visions has always been a thrill for me, because the pool of participants is so international, and because the primary goals of the project are idealistic. At its beginning, the workshop was conceived not only as a greenhouse for the next generation of non-fiction filmmakers in Europe, but also as a way to encourage production across national borders, on the eve of the European Union. It has succeeded at both those tasks. When I hear that a former participant from Austria is using a German/Japanese colleague he met in Visions to help produce his new film, or that a student from Holland is still making movies, despite the births of her two children, it seems to me that the hopes of the GEECT leaders who put the first workshop together are actually being addressed.

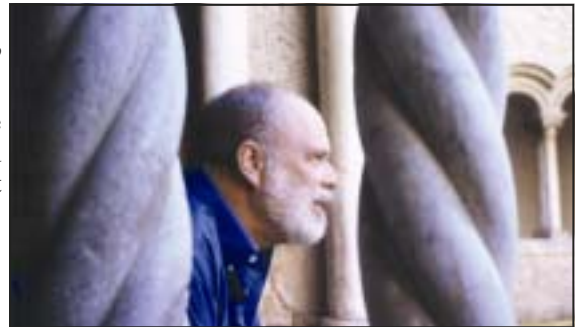
The Visions Project has an unusual structure. A program without physical facilities or production equipment of its own, it moves gypsy-like from one country to another. It has always been financed in stages, and is dependent on students' home schools to produce the projects it develops. Its form may defy conservative notions of how film education should be organized, but in seven years, its participants have completed twenty-six documentaries in seventeen countries, with thirteen more now in production. All of the completed films have been exhibited beyond the classroom. Several have won prizes. A few have been screened internationally, and one walked off with the Tuschenski Prize, Holland's award for best student documentary of the year.

What has made this possible, I think, is that the project has always been

responsive to the creative needs of its students, and willing to evolve to meet those needs.

VISIONS 1: 1994-1995

The project's first leader was Michael Rabiger, whose book *Directing the Documentary* is still the most influential teaching text in the field. Michael organized the first workshop as a set of three meetings, over a span of a year and a half, with students developing proposals, shooting footage and editing their projects between the three gatherings. The first meeting was the longest that Visions has ever held: twenty-six days at the *Literarisches Colloquium Berlin-Wansee*, hosted by HFF "Konrad Wolf", Potsdam-Babelsberg. It included a set of three shooting exercises on videotape, designed not only to teach documentary techniques but also to give participants a chance to bond with one another. These alternated with exercises on paper, designed to stimulate cinematic thinking, and with discussions of the workshop's central theme: "Confronting the Stranger." Screenings of documentaries from several countries were held at night, and a separate seminar for teachers from participating schools was convened in the middle of the month. (It produced a book in German and English, *Teaching the Documentary in Europe*, which captured ideas from the teacher's meeting and collected the favorite exercises of that group.) In the last two weeks of the workshop, students were asked to screen the film they had used as an application to the program, for discussion and evaluation by everyone. Finally, each participant was assigned to develop a documentary concept that would conform to the overarching theme. These were discussed in private appointments between the students and Michael, or between the students and one of the two educators he had hired as co-teachers – myself



and Madeleine Bergh of the Dramatic Institute in Stockholm. After some rewriting, each student presented his or her proposal to the whole group, with the intention of heading home to produce it.

The second meeting was held in Prague, from January twenty-first to February fifth of 1995, where students were expected to report on the progress they had made. Most were still in preproduction. Only a few had footage to show, and only one (the Dutch film that later won the Tuschenski prize) was in rough-cut. A few projects were stalled, either because of conflicts with the filmmaker's other schoolwork, or because of problems with subject matter. As teachers, we were faced with the difficult choice of sticking to our schedule (and perhaps eliminating some projects that were falling behind) or allowing the timing of productions to diverge, at the risk that some of them would become untenably extended. Then we had a piece of luck. Rolf Ortel, one of the early organizers of the project, struck an agreement with the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam to review those films that were complete by late fall. If the completed movies met the reviewer's standards, they would be given a sidebar screening at the festival itself in early December, out of competition but open to all ticketholders.

This proved to be exactly the kind of incentive our students needed – a new goal with the alluring prospect of public exposure, but only for those projects that were completed on schedule. Eleven productions were finished in time for the festival, all of

which were accepted for screening. Visions 1 concluded with a third meeting in Amsterdam, to attend IDFA and critique the finished films. (As a footnote, I should add that one of the films that did not begin production – a Finnish study of a young woman who had killed her child's father – was completed almost six years after our meeting in Prague – proof once again that patience can be a documentarian's best friend.)

VISIONS 2: 1997-1998

Two years later, when money became available for a second round of Visions, Michael Rabiger was already booked with other work. But Madeleine Bergh and I had an advantage that would help us compensate for this loss. Visions 2 would meet in Amsterdam, hosted by NFTVA, and the first session would coincide with IDFA 1997. This allowed us to use the festival's bookings as fodder for our own discussions, and gave our students some access to the press kits and pitching which are part of its professional market. Madeleine also arranged for a classroom visit from a young Swedish filmmaker who was screening her first documentary at IDFA. She attended with her cinematographer and her producer. All three of these women were eye opening for our students, some of whom had not fully comprehended what it takes to produce and market a movie outside the classroom.

Thanks to feedback from students in Visions I, Madeleine and I had already made some changes in the workshop's schedule. One of these was to eliminate the common theme, which had proved more ephemeral than anyone expected. Another was to increase the emphasis on projects that students had completed before they came to the workshop. Our Visions 1 students had told us that those films, fragmentary and unsophisticated though they often were, had provided them with their best understanding of each other's personalities and aspirations. They said that the development of personal points of view, and the discovery of the themes which come from point-of-view, had been the most valuable lessons of their workshop. They had told us that, in future rounds, whatever we could do to en-

courage self-awareness would be worthwhile.

Our Visions 1 students had also said that the three shooting exercises, although valuable as a source of *camaraderie*, were emphasizing technical information which most of them already knew. So Madeleine and I decided to eliminate one of those exercises, making room to screen more early work.

The other change we made was to ask students to submit a proposal for their Visions film as part of the application process, rather than at the end of the first session. This, we hoped, would speed the process of getting acquainted and extend the time for critiques.

And so it did. By the end of our meeting in Amsterdam, projects looked somewhat better on paper. And by spring, the changes we had made seemed to be speeding up production. When we met for our second session, hosted by the Bulgarian National Film Academy in Sofia, more projects had at least some footage to screen, and those that didn't seemed more fully articulated on paper. Teacher-student conferences were intense, in Sofia, and student-student conferences had begun to yield something more than emotional support.

At the third meeting in October, sponsored by the *Scuola Nazionale di Cinema* in Rome and held in a monastery two hours south of the city, so many of the projects were near completion that I was inspired to add a study unit on the promotion and distribution of these films. This met with mixed results. Some students felt enthusiastic about printing posters and managing screenings to publicize their projects, while others felt that such self-promotion might backfire, in their countries, calling the value of their work into question. This reminded me that the workshop, for all the common ground we had managed to create, was still a meeting of different, and sometimes disparate, cultures.

Once again, thanks to the efforts of Rolf Orthel, the Visions 2 films that were complete by fall were accepted into IDFA, bringing the workshop full circle. Since GEECT funding had been allocated to the first three meet-

ings, not all the students were able to attend this additional event, but those who did get to see their work in public.

VISIONS 3: 2000 - 2001

Funding for Visions 3 came suddenly and late at the end of 2000, thanks to the creative efforts of Caterina D'Amico at Rome's SNC. The first meeting was held in Chieri, near Turin, in a space that was earmarked for the Italian school's animation program, but which had not yet been occupied. Already convinced that the training of point-of-view was one of our most valuable lessons, Madeleine and I took one more step, asking each student to begin the workshop with a single presentation that included both a screening and critique of past work, and a presentation of the new proposal. Although time consuming, it was remarkable how much this technique did to uncover latent themes and interests. We maintained the two shooting exercises from Visions 2, whose bonding properties seemed especially strong this time. At the end of the meeting, we also asked our students for a more complete and critical self-assessment. These reports showed us that Visions students are becoming better at defining their own interests and subject matter. As a direct result, they are also becoming more efficient at planning their films.

Our support was strong in Chieri. Rolf Orthel contributed a lecture on constructing effective openings, and Michael Rabiger returned to talk about how documentaries can create dramatic structure, build characters, and manipulate time. He and Rolf met individually with many of the students, multiplying the number of creative reactions to their proposals. As a supplement, the group also had a visit from two Italian documentarians, who screened the director's cut of their film on the war in Afghanistan. Long, violent, and moving, it reminded us that one great goal of non-fiction film is simply to bear witness. A second screening, from a videomaker whose work culls World War II footage from the film archive in Turin, showed us both how potent those images really are, and how difficult it is to turn them to contemporary purposes.

And so, in April, we arrived in Brati-

slava, for a second meeting hosted by FTF VŠMU. Once again, the films-in-progress looked tighter, more defined, and more self-expressive than they had in previous rounds. Even those proposals which had collapsed since December were replaced by their authors with others just as provocative – a good sign that students are learning to work from inside their own beliefs. Our host, Zuzana Gindl-Tatárová, remarked on the number of strong projects from women, and observed that our students seemed very supportive of each other's efforts.

The value of Visions 3 will lie in its results, of course. If these productions proceed as scheduled, a number of them will again be finished in time for application to IDFA, which has become our greatest source of external support. By providing a tight but reasonable deadline for completion, the Dutch festival has given our students something immediate to aim for. Nothing, it seems, improves a filmmaker's energy like the knowledge that an audience is waiting. And nothing improves an educational program's performance like the opportunity to revise and try again.

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CILECT CONFERENCE

THEORY FOR FILM SCHOOLS

Ljubljana

15 – 18 November 2001

Igor Koršič, Project Head

"Shall theory leave it here, and move on, self satisfied with absolute conclusions and rules? Then it is of no practical use. Theory must also take into account the human element; it must accord place to courage, to boldness, even to rashness.

The art (of war) has to deal with living and with moral forces, the consequence of which it is that it can never attain the absolute and positive."

Von Clausewitz, *On War*

The aim of the CILECT project with the working title Kalos - k'agathos, selected at the last CILECT congress at Ebeltoft, was to investigate the problems that we have with the theoretical part of film school education.

Our first consideration was the "theory of film" itself. But it is obvious that such a scope is inappropriate. We decided to consider more general aspects of theoretical teaching at film school, including the theory that is necessarily also part of craft subjects like editing and directing.

We tend to use the notion of theory, for everything from an explanatory model and self-reflection to subtler philosophical thought, and it could benefit from more careful consideration.

The obvious central issue concerning work at film schools is that of quality. Of course we want good, creative filmmakers who will make good films. But what are the values that we are looking for and promoting? How do we identify potential values in the process of student selection? This

issue was the subject of discussion at the recent GEECT Paris conference at La Fémis.

We see certain potential values, largely at a theoretical level, in the submissions of potential students. How do we endorse and nurture these values and enlist them to serve the needs of film practice, in our teaching?

What kinds of theory do we need in the teaching of film and television practice, how much, and how should it be taught in order to foster and promote the quality of creative work?

So that we may share different points of view on the same subject, this four-day conference will be divided into 20 minute time slots. 20 minutes is also the length of the papers that should be submitted.

One of the four days is going to be devoted to the evaluation and assessment of curricula. Theoretical curricula at certain numbers of schools are going to be presented and evaluated as case studies.

I am proposing the following topics (but feel free to propose new ones, or to modify, for example, by combining my suggestions):

- * The central values at play in a film school
- * 100 basic notions and concepts that a film-maker should master
- * 20 non-fiction books that students should read
- * 50 works of fiction that should be read by students
- * 20 theatre plays that a student should have seen
- * 50 obligatory classic films that a

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