

FILM STUDIES 185/187: From Abilene to Berlin by Gavriel Moses



Professor Moses, for years the only faculty member at Berkeley who, in addition to his academic degrees, had actually graduated from a nuts & bolts Film School, teaches and writes by pointing his lens at the watershed dividing theory & practice. Thus his book, *The Nickel Was for the Movies*, aims to show, among other things, how film practice and film theory are entwined. He believes that, in all art forms, practice precedes theory, and that filmmakers, rather than be cowed by the discourse of film theory, can only benefit from its retrospective insights and prospective formulations.

IS FILM PRODUCTION SOMETHING NEW AT BERKELEY?

I still have films in my files which were made over the years, with my help, by my students at Berkeley. They worked independently, at great personal expense, or they made their films as part of my film studies classes. For those who could not afford 16mm., the first generation of Sony AV-3400 Portapak came to the rescue: yes... those "portable" concrete blocks that "filmed" in Gray&Gray. Some of these students, years later, even mailed me their first feature.

DID SUCH FILMS POSSESS A BERKELEY INFLECTION?

Most certainly. Be the films abstract, conceptual, documentary, narrative, or counter-narrative, the proximity of students, library, faculty, and the camera lens (the close connection, that is, between culture examined and culture expressed) generates a distinct idiom. Who but students from Berkeley, one may well ask, would make a feature film entitled *Suture*?

WHY, THEN, START FILMMAKING AT BERKELEY ONLY NOW?

Obtaining the technology necessary to serious film work in a university setting, and paying for it, was a forbidding task. Until, that is, very recently, when digital changed the equation. While analog film production is still beyond the reach of young filmmakers, digital filmmaking

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narrative genres, are interested in testing the limits of the conventional, and then going well beyond it. Yet in this they don't differ from many in the younger generation of Hollywood based directors, indistinguishable by now from those who used to be called independent.

BUT ISN'T BERKELEY MOSTLY ABOUT AVANT GARDE FILMMAKING?

Not at all. Berkeley being Berkeley, we plan of course to encourage a great deal of cutting edge experimental work. In fact, the work of those who have been teaching hands-on filmmaking for quite a while here, ranges from Anne Walsh's Video Art to Greg Niemeyer's New Media. Our new colleague Jeffrey Skoller will extend our range even further. But meanwhile Mira Koppel has been teaching Screenwriting and, if my own courses so far have been about narrative, it is in response to the wishes of students. Yet I believe that a thorough knowledge of narrative infrastructure is useful as well for other kinds of filmmaking. All genres depend, albeit in their different ways, on the cultural conventions that we share in order to make ourselves understood. In their turn, such conventions owe a great deal to the rules of narrative discourse. What digital allows us to do is to narrow the gap between storytelling and individual voice. Freed from an oppressive superstructure, narrative can become as challenging and as personal as the most daring of experimental films.

This is revolutionary.

CAN YOU BE MORE SPECIFIC? WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY REVOLUTIONARY?

The industry thinks that digital is merely convenient, as long as it can mimic the "look" of older film technologies. Yet, far more important, digital provides a vast new repertory of formal possibilities. It enables better creative control in telling stories. Film editing, newly streamlined and efficient, is at home on student laptops. Post-production, no longer in need of industrial-scale facilities and endowment level expense, is now in our hands. No more lab technicians droning in monotonous ostinato: "Can't be done." No more personal visions highjacked by editors who know better; purloined by producers with an eye to the bottom line.

YES, BUT WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

It means that you can now take your film all the way to Sundance, to Telluride, and even to your downtown multiplex. It means that any film maker starting out on a career can now wield the equivalent of a small film studio from her backpack. For the first time in the history of the medium, filmmakers have direct and affordable access to the means of narrative film production.

SOUNDS VERY TECHNICAL. WHY NOT GO TO FILM SCHOOL?

We feel that hands on experience in the actual practice of that which we teach as history and as theory, is an essential component of the program. This is why, in Fall 2003, I was asked by Film Studies to take our occasional courses in Digital Filmmaking to a new level. It so happened that I was in a position to leverage my oddly stereoscopic training (in filmmaking and academic work both) and could bring to bear years of experience in teaching narrative theory on the technological aspects of such classes. Thus, I am in a position to bridge for my students the traditional chasm between theory and practice: Theory for Filmmakers, you might say.

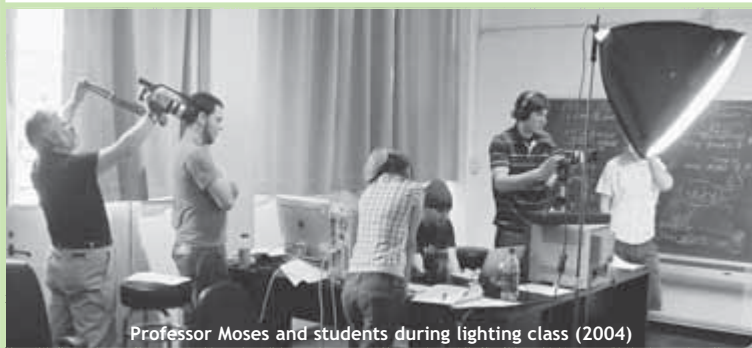
AND FILM SCHOOLS DON'T DO THIS?

Film Schools by and large are invested in the technical side of filmmaking. Even when they don't mean to be, they are mere vocational feeders. We are not. It is hard to think of a campus intellectually as rich and as vital as ours. Thus, Berkeley offers student filmmakers the opportunity to enrich the foundations of their creative careers with intellectual substance, chosen from the vast variety of fields found on our campus. Here they can do it, moreover, at a time in their formation when it can make a real difference. They can acquire a solid intellectual self assurance that might help them counter the anti-intellectual bias they will find to be current in the film industry.

SO HOW DO THESE COURSES WORK IN PRACTICE?

Their final payoff is a 15-20 minute film. Students write the story, develop it fully, and prepare a shooting script. While they write, we cover the nature and acquisition of digital image and sound. Then we practice digital editing by making several short films.

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Professor Moses and students during lighting class (2004)

begins to make it affordable and now equals (and will soon surpass) the quality and precision of celluloid.

BUT ISN'T DIGITAL INFERIOR TO TRADITIONAL FILM MEDIA?

One may argue at length about the differing phenomenologies of bits and emulsion. It is my view that such controversies derive from the false premise that digital filmmaking is merely useful as a cheap substitute. It is not. It is, rather, a new medium in its own right. Avant-garde filmmakers have of course known this all along, and it is true for narrative filmmaking as well.

BY NARRATIVE FILMMAKING DO YOU MEAN HOLLYWOOD?

This is Berkeley, remember. Our aspiring filmmakers, even those who don't take to the non-

More Student Voices



NICK SANTANIELLO

The video production classes offered by the Film Studies department were by far the most exciting and worthwhile classes I took part in during my time at the university. In addition to intensive personal

instruction and access to cutting-edge technology, perhaps the most valuable aspect of these courses is the open forum they provide for students to share their work and learn from each other. In stark contrast to the impersonal and detached mass lectures of other departments, these classes border on the intimate. Students learn every nuance of filmmaking, both technically and in terms of narrative storytelling. Aside from producing quality entertainment, students gain skills that are absolutely vital in a society that has grown accustomed to passively absorbing an increasingly dominant mass media without questioning it or applying any form of critical analysis.

DEREK WOODS

Working with the application of film theory was truly an experience that brought the theory I was studying home. Now attending graduate film school I feel like what I learned at Berkeley was an amazing foundation for my move into film production.



HELENE PARK

As an Art Practice student, I had experimented with painting and installation art, but knew very little about film production. It seemed completely foreign, daunting and intimidating. Through

film production courses I was introduced to the language of "Firewire Cables", "Capturing", and the "Gigabites". In class we created short pieces that challenged my creative writing and story-telling skills. I wrote, directed and edited a 20-minute long vampire musical. I feel very fortunate to have had this experience. Today, I intend to earn an MFA in film production.



RICHARD PARKIN

An integral part of the production class is an emphasis on translating ideas and concepts into story structure and style.

We were encouraged through readings in literature, theory, and filmmaking, to develop alternate ways of telling stories. I was interested in making a short film that used a non-linear story structure. Considering the limits of a ten-minute short, it is very difficult to tell a coherent story that is chronologically out of order. Before filming, Professor Moses challenged me to consider how a non-linear story structure will aid in developing certain themes and concepts I wanted to convey with my film.

Student Voices

The production classes and opportunities at UC Berkeley have been a crucial part of my education. However, the program as it exists today is severely limited. To my knowledge, only one digital production class is taught per semester. Students from the film studies department scramble to enroll, and those that do get in suffer from a student-teacher ratio that is too high. Dedicated professors are too overworked to see to the varying demands of such a course. Additionally, resources are extremely scarce. I often used my own materials (lights, cameras, mics, computers, etc) to work on projects. Funds for more professional equipment is critical to the success of such an undertaking. **ERIC MARTIN**

Everyone wants to go to film school these days, and in the fall of 2004 I was no exception, but I had never taken a production class before. I had never shown my films to anyone but a few of my closest friends. Even before classes began, I had expressed to Professor Moses some anxiety about screening my amateurish work for my classmates. "That's the only way you're going to learn," he replied. By the time my film screening ended though, I had already learned the first and most important lesson on filmmaking: a filmmaker makes films for the joy of screening his work for an audience.

I was fortunate enough to be accepted at the University of Southern California's film school, where many of my classmates come as already accomplished filmmakers. I quickly discovered that despite the extensive experience of my peers, I was not so far behind the best of them. I was particularly proficient in the areas of editing and narrative structure. I often think to myself how difficult my first semester film school would have been had I not taken the Digital Video production course. How would I have felt at my first screening never having shown my work to anyone before? How would I have directed an actor never having made a narrative before? It was a combination of luck and happenstance that gave me my most valuable experience at UC Berkeley, and I urge you to lend your support to the program that has done so much for me, as it will for future students. **ROLAND NGUYEN**



Screen Test (Derek Woods, fall 2004)

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Students re-edit auteur counter-narratives to test the limits of classical narrative rules. They create an entire film from found-footage. With no actors and no script, they find bits of real life that intimate possible narratives; they explore a location that by itself (no actors, no dialogue, minimal staging) tells a story.

BUT DOESN'T ALL THIS OVERWHELM THE INTELLECTUAL WORK YOU JUST MENTIONED?

Indeed it could, were it not for the fact that, throughout this process we examine and debate its conceptual aspects. We examine the implications of every component. We study the semiotic and narrative rules that allow a film to be clear about its process and its meaning. In other words, while fully engaged in the practice of filmmaking, we take what has been absorbed as students, and rethink it all as testy individuals, as rebellious and troublesome filmmakers.

AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DO THIS?

The students discover in what way history and theory may be relevant to them, and how this might inform their films. The subject matter of their recent work speaks for itself: stories exploring the contradictions of time & space, curious about a life controlled by aberrant neurology, challenged by what is at stake when self aggrandizing narrative invades the space of political activism. If you happened to catch the showcases that featured the films these students have made, you know what I mean. If not there, you could have seen these films as they went on to the PFA, to other Student Showcases and to Festivals. Students from FS185 and FS187 have won 1st and 2nd place at the Berkeley Eisner Awards and at the nationwide Campus Movie Fest. They have entries at film festivals from Abilene to Berlin.

SOUNDS EXCITING: YOU SEEM TO APPROACH FILMMAKING WITH A DISTINCT PHILOSOPHY

I believe that the most important thing a filmmaker needs to learn from the outset (over and above how to make his films) is what she is going to put into them. Of course filmmakers need to master both aspects. Yet the most difficult task for a filmmaker is to have something to say that is worth saying. There was never, of course, a good reason that practicing filmmakers should regard the critical perspective on the history of their medium, and a subtle awareness of its theory, as an esoteric diversion. Yet, as we know, this has always been the case and still is. I believe we can make a difference (perhaps even change such attitudes among professional filmmakers) in the context of filmmaking as taught at Berkeley.