

**The Troubles of trying to explain an Economic Art:  
Implementing Reflective Film Analysis**

**by Carl Schoenfeld**

Teaching Fellow  
Oxford Brookes University  
School of Technology, School of Arts and Humanities

Module Leader  
B.A. (Hons) Digital Filmmaking  
SAE Institute – A Skillset Media Academy

**Keywords**

Film screening, Filmmaking,  
David Kolb, Reflection, Experiential Learning, Higher Education

The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.

*Hector in Allan Bennett's The History Boys (2006)*

## **Introduction**

In May 2005 I was invited to run a British Council sponsored workshop on Digital Filmmaking at the Transylvania International Film Festival in Cluj, Romania. Travelling by air via Bucharest, it was not only the small rattling plane that made me nervous. Although I had already run dozens of similar workshops from Folkestone to New Delhi, this one was different. As we drove from the airport past donkey carts carrying farm produce, I wondered how to teach two dozen northern Romanian teenagers about the great opportunities afforded by the most recent developments in digital video and computer technology that I would usually discuss in my seminars with emerging filmmakers: which stories lend themselves to capturing with a small lightweight video camera; the enormous budget savings when all those trucks and silver boxes full of horrendously expensive special equipment are no longer required; cutting back on all those experts who are trained and experienced in operating this equipment, and the cost of feeding them, insuring everything, etc.

I feared that my programme and its ambitions were quite inadequate for these students. Moreover, I was worried about the level of English language skills that are indispensable for an analytical and reflective discussion on films and filming experiences, as well as the degree of film literacy necessary to discuss

examples, illustrate solutions to problems with case studies and generally establish a hands-on and relevant environment.

Yet I should not have worried. Their level of English was comparable to their TV-schooled Scandinavian counterparts. Being very Internet savvy, as a group they had seen pretty much every recent Hollywood studio picture, American independent or European arthouse film I could mention. As we were working with many examples, the workshop became very enjoyable and successful, and it led to regular local follow-up events.

## **Aims**

The encounter challenged not only my cultural prejudices about Eastern Europe, but also illustrated the global educational potential of internet file exchange and made me aware of my reliance on extra-curricular viewing experiences in my teaching. In this paper it is not the teaching of digital technology, stereotyping and piracy but the potential of this latter, often unacknowledged and unexamined resource – reflection – that I wish to explore further. In addition, my practice as a film producer made me aware that well reflected viewing experiences play an essential role for professionals not only for analysis and evaluation of their peers' productions, but also for developing the aims, structure, characterisation and style of their own films. The notion of rules or theories seems fickle since for every rule some textbooks provide, there are not only exceptions but also counter-arguments that these 'exceptions' may become a signature element to personal style or 'voice'. In all areas of filmmaking (writing, directing, cinematography, and

design, as well as financing), advanced practitioners constantly seek to cover new ground, find new ways of shaping their stories to stimulate curiosity, surprise audiences and race ahead of the competition.

Accordingly, I shall attempt to apply the theories of David Kolb to the professional learning process of appropriating forms of expression from existing film work with a view toward understanding the usefulness of both personal viewing experience and established theory for the planning and making of films (which for the purpose of this paper includes documentaries, narrative TV shows as well as shorts, including those that are increasingly available on the internet).

## **Background**

Facing an increasingly complex body of international film and TV products that refer and relate to each other, new generations of filmmakers serving audiences who appreciate those references with a post-modern sensibility need some kind of structure to deal with such professional challenges. In the words of one of Britain's leading film directors, Stephen Frears (*My Beautiful Launderette*, *The Hi-Lo Country*, *Mrs Henderson Presents*): '50 Years ago anybody could make westerns – now you need a degree!' (quoted in Andrew 2005).

Thus when teaching film, we need to be aware that contemporary students carry a repository of viewing experiences that can aid them when analysing and evaluating case studies, constituted from: a) connections between their

response to any film that is presented to them in a curricular context; b) the thousands of films they have seen in the past; and c) works they harbour ambitions to create in the future. In this triangle, their personal reactions (both subjective as well as social) to a film provide essential data in their learning curve as they discover what makes a film moving, funny, scary, etc.

### **Theory and Practice in Higher Education**

Closest to my original ambition, I hope to begin the foundation for a bridge across the chasm of established conflict between theory and practice in the teaching of film, the 'bifurcation' as Desmond Bell calls it (quoted in Thomas and Downmunt 2004). According to Bell, we are currently facing a crisis as media studies 'drive a wedge between theory and practice' (Bell 2004:742).

Likewise, beginning solely with practical exercises may also have a detrimental effect:

'The final results, what [the students] can in practice achieve with an inexperienced student crew and very limited facilities, more often than not bear no relation to the vision with which they started. This is of course very disappointing.' (Bernstein 2007:73)

This may serve as an indication that it is perhaps time to re-evaluate the notion of theory in film teaching in view of developing 'practice guidelines [that] are based on common foundations of what practitioners believe to be desirable' (Boud 1995:13).

### **Theory and Practice – *in Practice***

The influence of film reception on filmmaking is well documented. On this point, Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*, *Goodfellas*, *The Departed*), arguable one of the greatest living directors, said:

‘I am often asked by younger filmmakers: why do I need to look at old movies? The only response I can give them is: I still consider myself a student ... The more pictures I make the more I realise I don’t know. I’m always looking for something or someone I can learn from. (1999)’

In his book *Film Remakes*, Australian film theorist Constantine Verevis (2006) demonstrates how the body of work of classical Hollywood directors like Otto Preminger, Alfred Hitchcock and George Cukor as well as specific *noir* melodramas like *You Only Live Once* (F. Lang 1937), *They Live By Night* (N. Ray 1948) and *Gun Crazy* (J. Lewis 1950) stimulated one the most influential films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *A Bout de Souffle* by Jean-Luc Godard (1960). Whilst that film lead to a direct remake, *Breathless* (Jim McBride 1983), Verevis shows how the French *A Bout de Souffle* had a direct impact on one of the great classics of American cinema, *Bonnie & Clyde* (A. Penn 1967). This latter film, also based on a true story already previously filmed as *The Bonnie Parker Story* (W. Witney 1958), was made on a low budget of \$2.5m and attracted an extremely profitable box office of \$25m, and was nominated for 9 Academy Awards, winning 2. It thus became a paradigm for the rebellious yet lucrative new American cinema (Puttnam 1997:260) including Terrence Malick’s celebrated 1973 debut, *Badlands*. Further and equally widely discussed descendants featuring social criticism, forbidden romance and a killing spree include, amongst many others: *Wild at Heart* (D. Lynch 1990) and *Natural Born Killers* (O. Stone 1994). Verevis encapsulates this complex relationship between filmmakers, other films and their own work when she quotes the Japanese director Seijin Suzuki, who, upon seeing American director Jim Jarmusch’s 1999 film *Ghost Dog* which includes many references to his work, is reported to have said:

‘I see you have taken some things from me, and when I make my next film, I’m going to take some things from you.’ (quoted in Verevis 2006)

Filmmakers often glean useful narrative or visual elements from existing films and use precedents to develop and communicate the vision for their projects. Prior to shooting, many directors screen relevant films to their cast and crew to facilitate a visualisation process whereby every collaborator shares the same yet invisible goal: a film that first only exists in the director’s mind that they all need to work towards on set. Chris Nolan’s strategy to instruct his cinematographer Wally Pfister by means of visual precedents *Jacob’s Ladder* (Adrian Lyne 1998), *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne 1998) and *The Thin Red Line* (Terence Malick 1999) for his film *Memento* (2000) serves as an instructive example. *The Thin Red Line* also served as a model for composer David Julyan’s score for the *Memento* (Mottram 2002:92, 120-121).

### **Reflective Film Analysis**

Central to Reflective Film Analysis is the referencing of a viewed film’s perceived effect, including achievements and shortcomings, and an awareness of the value systems against which such judgements are made. Both individual response and cultural influences are thus integrated according to the model of David Kolb’s experiential learning circle (Kolb, D. A. & Allen D. 1984:133):

‘The experiential learning theory of development focuses on the transaction between internal characteristics and external circumstances, between personal knowledge and social knowledge. It is the process of learning from experience that shapes and actualises developmental potentialities.’

For the practitioner, the most relevant questions to ask in order to understand any particular cause and effect relationship are: 'Why is this film funny?'; 'What makes it scary?'; or 'Why am I moved?' We appreciate that such a relationship will always be unique and will not constitute a formula by which students' own successes can be achieved, for the simple reason that we may not laugh at the same joke twice, may not be scared by the same surprise, or may fail to be moved by a worn out yarn. As Malcolm Heath established in his introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics* (Heath, M. 1996:xi), narrative theory or *tekhne* may not make someone more effective at composing plots:

*'In general, the ability to do something well does not depend on understanding, nor does understanding necessarily imply an ability to do it well... Poets must be able to project themselves into the emotions of others; natural talent, or even a touch of insanity, are necessary for this' (Heath, M. 1996:x).*

For these reasons we need to understand that any methodology will have its limitations, and we cannot expect to produce a foolproof recipe for how to become an artist. Instead, we can only aim to create an ideal environment for talent to develop.

For this investigation of the correlation between a film and a potential learning process arising from a screening it is helpful that Kolb begins the experiential learning cycle with the appreciation of an emotional response range (Kolb, D. A. & Allen D. 1984:135):

Excitement  
Distress/Jealousy ⇔ Delight/Joy  
Anger ⇔ Elation  
Disgust/Fear ⇔ Affection



We can therefore apply Kolb's circular model to the experience of watching films, analysing their impact (including our responses), evaluating their achievements, theorising about their effectiveness, and consequently finding an effective form for our own expression.

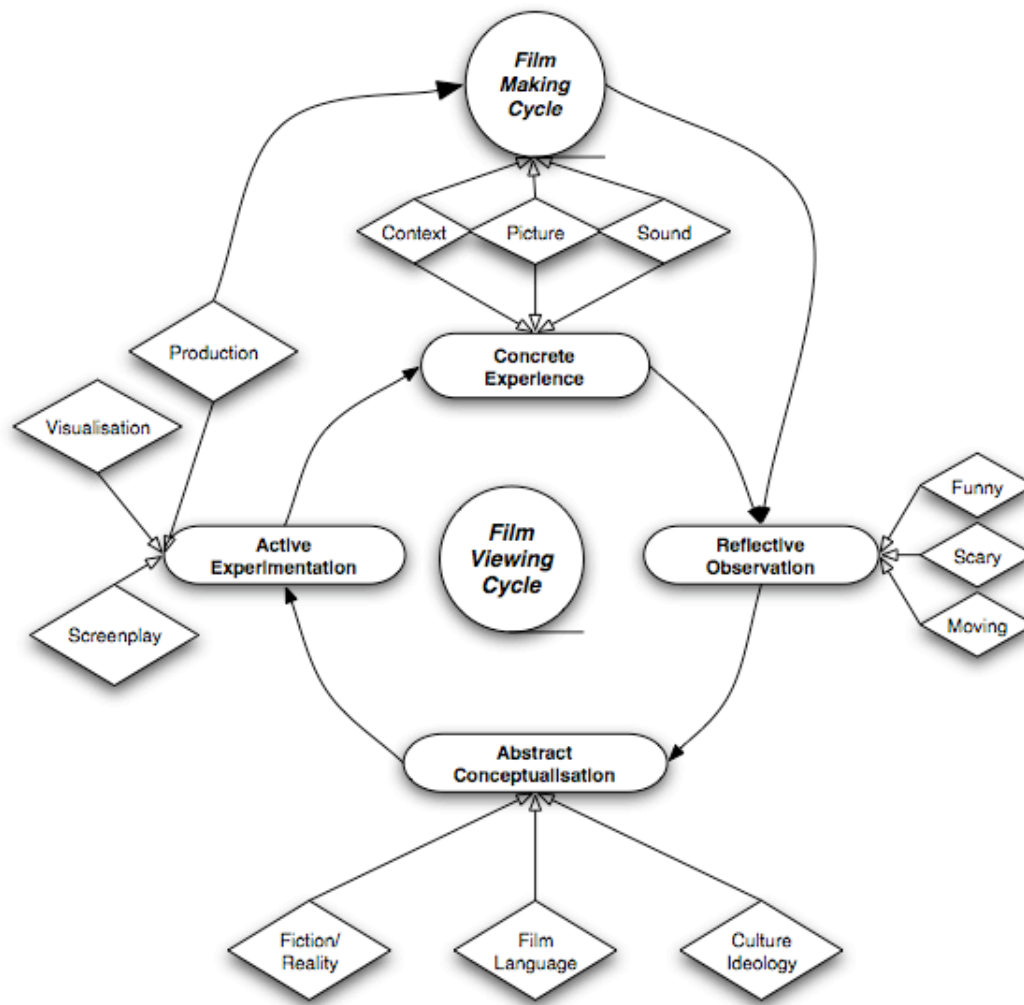


Fig. 1 Kolb's learning cycle adapted to film screening and production

The graphic representation in Figure 1 above includes both options, whereby knowledge gathered may be used either for another concrete viewing experience in order to further enhance the learners' cognitive skills and improve planning tools such as screenplay and visual concept/package, or (if the learners are ready) for the ultimate synthesis and commencement of an

actual production, where they again are encouraged to use the reflective skills gathered in earlier cycles to understand both their strengths and, in particular, weaknesses, and to address these in further work, e.g. by finding alternative strategies or working with skilled partners who can compensate for these weaknesses. Thus the team effort becomes a complex personal experience (de Jong 2006: 153) leading simultaneously to better transferable project-planning skills as well as a self-understanding that should assist the student in managing their studies as well as later career. De Jong calls such work based on the integration of the full learning cycle *theory empowered practice* (de Jong 2006:157). Students can thus use their evolving critical skills to compare their results with original ambitions and develop a new plan to improve future work.

However, Susannah Capon (in Thomas and Dowmount 2005) identifies a potential threat to the effectiveness of reflection in a learning context, 'that reflection [...] can be an inhibiting factor in creative work'. It is therefore vital that students get an opportunity in their first learning circles to embrace some degree of synthesis in the form of creative exercise, even if (due to constraints in time and resources) that may be limited to advanced planning of projects, rather than production. This could also create an opportunity for original 'light-bulb moments' to inject some raw and 'messy' student creativity into the classroom, and therefore address Mike Waynes concern (quoted in Maras 2005) that 'we become slaves to a particular kind of practice and rule out alternatives'.

In this context, standard academic skills including research should help to avoid cliché and *fan-boy* (or *-girl*) responses, whilst enhancing students' insight into the creative, production and distribution processes. Students can thus develop a keener perspective on existing filmed or literary texts and begin their learning cycle with a strong experiential foundation. Students are encouraged to see all film and TV viewing as homework that both supports their coursework and helps them to develop their voice as a filmmaker.

Reflecting in my own teaching experience, the following recommendations for teaching and learning activities evolve:

### *Watching as Experience*

Revising the previous class with a brief discussion of how course content has been applied outside the classroom helps students to critically assess the relevance of lecture content. More screenings demonstrate the value of analysis and evaluation tools. Screenings are paused at emotionally crucial points (a dramatic turning point, a successful joke or a jolt), to give students an opportunity to discuss the impact of a scene and develop theories as to how the filmmaker managed to create a particular effect. Hobbs (1998) argues for the effectiveness of this method used by Prof. Smith-Knowles, when the starting and stopping of a film at thematic breaks 'invites the students to analyse, comment and share their memories, discovers that different students are processing the message differently.'

### *Student Reflection*

Students' individual emotional responses to film texts in both class and written coursework are encouraged to allow familiarisation with their own sensibilities as filmmakers.

### *Conceptualisation*

To assist the student in discovering how theoretical frameworks can aid understanding, it helps to work with fewer (ideally student-selected) case studies more thoroughly, leading to a reflective logbook and blogs either as formative assignments or as exploration of the different ways a film can impact on a variety of individuals. Initial theories are being formed when asking why a film may have been designed in a particular way.

### *Experimentation*

Allow constructivism to happen: make time for as many presentations as the curriculum allows.

### **Conclusion**

Umberto Eco very clearly pointed out the double edged nature of visual communication when he wrote that 'a democratic civilisation will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for reflection, and not an invitation for hypnosis' (1979:33). Whilst it could be demonstrated that there are great opportunities in a structured yet personal exploration of the moving image for relevant fields of study, the limitations of this paper would not allow us to even begin with a review of relevant literature, let alone

explore the impact that each stage of reflection, theorising and planning can have on the student. Further research could explore opportunities that arise when we apply Donald Schon's (1987) holistic and more tacit concept of 'reflection-in-action' to mirror professionals 'on the spot' use of experiential learning. Whilst this teaching method could help to professionalize the education in the rapidly growing film and media related studies, it is hoped that in the context of and increasingly iterative relationship between filmmakers and audience, such a high level critical approach would filter through into the wider viewing public and help to shift the balance from mass media 'hypnosis' and towards a more critical reflection of all media content.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Diana Williams who was an essential guide and helped to make the process of investigation an instructive and intelligent process. I am also very grateful to Chris Rust at Oxford Brookes for his encouragement and guidance into and during my Teaching Fellowship, without which this work would not have been possible. Head Lecturer Darren Gash at SAE Institute London deserves special thanks for many inspiring debates, as well as for trusting me to put the resulting innovative teaching and learning activities into practice. Special thanks to my wife Maureen for keeping the coffees going and then helping to clear up my restless elaborations.

*2705 words in main body*

## References

- Andrew, G. (2005) 'Bare Naked Ladies' *Time Out London*, 2 November, p. 56
- Bell, D. (2004) 'Practice Makes Perfect? Film and Media Studies and the Challenge of Creative Practice' *Media Culture Society*, No.5, Vol. 26, London: Sage
- Bennett, A. (2006) *The History Boys* (Screenplay), London: Faber & Faber
- Bernstein (2007) How the Pace of Work affects Student's imaginative Power, *CILECT News*, Special Issue February 2007, p. 73
- de Jong, W. (2006) 'From "doing" to knowing what you are doing": Kolb's learning theory in teaching documentary practice', *Journal of Media Practice*, Vol 7 No. 2
- Eco, U. (1979) 'Can Television Teach?' *Screen Education* No 31, London: Atom Publishing
- Heath, M. in Aristotle (1996): *Poetics*. London: Penguin Classics
- Hobbs, T. (1998) *Teaching about Film and Television: Integrating Media Literacy Concepts into Management Education*, Washington: ERIC
- Kolb, D. A. & Allen D. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall
- Maras, S. (2005), 'The problem of theory and practice: towards a constitutive analysis', *Journal of Media Practice* Volume 6, Number 2, pp. 93–103
- Mottram, J. (2002) *The Making of Memento*, London: Faber and Faber
- Puttnam, D. (1997) *The Undeclared War*, London: HarperCollins
- Said, Edward W. (1978) *Orientalism*, London: Penguin
- Schon, Donald (1987) Presentation to the meeting of the American Educational Research Association Washington, DC. 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner' [Online] Retrieved on 27 September from <http://educ.queensu.ca/~ar/schon87.htm>
- Scorsese, M. (1999) *A Personal Journey Through American Movies*, New York & London: Faber and Faber
- Thomas, R. and Dowmunt, T. (2005), 'Supervising and examining practice-based PhDs in the moving image. A report of a one day symposium on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> October 2004 at the University of Westminster, Regent Street', *Journal of Media Practice* 6: 2, pp. 121–126
- Verevis, C. (2005) *Film Remakes*, Edinburgh University Press