Producing Creative Producers

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Introduction

In most if not all national contexts the work of the 'creative producer' is essential to both the art and business of filmmaking. Yet the creative producer's role is perhaps the hardest, if not impossible, to properly reproduce in the film school context. The required alloy of creative and entrepreneurial skill can only truly be forged where and when the art of film-making is tempered by the business of securing both finance and an audience for the work.

I have no doubt that it is well understood by teachers and by students that, in film school, 'producing' is largely a matter of production management, of 'line producing' and that at the end of the day it is the director's and not the producer's film.

While this is as it should be for the director it does leave us with the problem of how to provide producers with the full spectrum of professional skills and experience. If the art of producing is expertly leading the creatively true, commercially astute transformation of material, talent and skills into a complete, finished work, a work that can reach its intended audience, how can we cultivate that art in a context where the director is leader, the commercial dimension is hypothetical and the audience is a secondary consideration to a complex set of pedagogic aims?

In this presentation I aim to reflect on some of the issues we have faced during our first five years offering specialist post-graduate programmes to would-be producers.

Producing creative producers

The real skills and talents of a creative producer can very easily remain hidden from view in the film school. To summarise these skills they are:

- spotting the right material for the right time;

- identifying and successfully attaching the right combination of talents and experience to turn promising story material into a irresistible script;

- finding the right director and other creative collaborators to transform that irresistible script into a great film;

- defending the creative integrity of the film's authors while simultaneously ensuring they go far enough, but not too far, in meeting expectations of public and private financiers, distributors, broadcasters, all of whom need some form of cultural or commercial return on their investment;

- positioning and marketing the film to maximise its impact and, ideally but not always, maximise its audience

All of these aptitudes and skills can be taught theoretically, as I'm sure we all do in our producers' courses. [Ours, incidentally, focuses on project *development* rather than project *production*, as it is in development that the creative producer's skills are most directly employed. This is because once a film has been 'green-lit', in school as in the real world it becomes primarily a production management task.] But can, indeed *should* we allow our

producers to fully exercise these skills on their peers and on film school productions?

After five years of pursuing the 'creative triangle' of the producer-writer-director relationship in the postgraduate part of our school, I am beginning to question whether in fact we should be trying to replicate the 'real world' within our courses. This re-evaluation of a central tenet of our approach seems important to me for the following reasons.

The first contradiction in composing student teams of producers, writers and directors is this: in the real world the healthiest producer-writer or producer-director relationship tends to derive, at least in the early stages of careers, from **the application of experience to talent**. An experienced producer can nurture a talented new writer through script development, they can protect a neophyte director from the siren songs of financiers, distributors and film fund executives. In film school (or indeed in the real world), where producer and writer or director tend to have similar levels of experience, contacts or credibility, however talented, committed and in tune with the writer or director the producer may be, he or she has limited cultural capital (and usually even less material capital) to bring to the table.

We could try to replicate this hierarchy of experience, setting postgraduate producers to work with undergraduates for example or, resources permitting, recruiting experienced producers outside our courses to work on a project basis with talented but less experienced writers and directors on our courses. We have had some experience and some success with both these approaches but for each problem they solve they create new problems.

In the first case, attaching upper year producers to lower year projects potentially limits the quality of material or personnel that the producer can work with and undermines their self-esteem. In the second case, the external professional connection can introduce a tension between the pedagogic aims of the school and the professional/commercial aims of the producer which may impact negatively on the interests of the director and other student members of the team.

Related to the question of experience, the writer or director, inexperienced or otherwise, needs above all to have **confidence in the abilities and trust in the judgement** of their producer. They need to know the producer can fulfil at least one of and preferably more than one of the roles we have identified. Without that implicit confidence and trust in the producer every creative discussion, every operational decision risks becoming a battleground where any initial suspicion that the producer is no better a judge than anyone else of what to do can easily become a conviction and the producer's 'authority' is quickly and fatally undermined, requiring teachers to shore up or countermand the judgements of the student producer.

Of course outside the academy executive producer(s), film funds etc. can and do intervene to support the producer or indeed to over-rule them. However uncomfortable, this is part of the learning curve for producers and reflects the hierarchy of, and rationale for, control that is derived from well tested commercial and contractual relationships.

Inside the academy we generally, and correctly, do not attempt to replicate this **form of hierarchy** precisely in order to preserve both the creative and educational space within which the directing student is expected to maximise their autonomy. This is so that they can be judged on the individuality of their work unconstrained by the interventions of a producing student. This works well for the director and for their 'subordinate' collaborators – e.g. cinematographer, editor, designer, composer, all of whom must in the last analysis adjust their individuality to the overriding judgement of the director. (Even in the least auteurist of collaborations the director remains 'first amongst equals'.)

But by the same token this removal of a key real world variable – the producer's formal control of the project - works against the development of some of the producer's most important faculties. Put simply we cannot afford to let the producer make the mistakes that in a very important sense they need to make in order to learn. The tolerance we extend to directors to act in compliance with their own judgements, despite our best advice to them, 'to let them make the necessary mistakes', is not a tolerance we can easily extend to producers in a creative relationship with writer or director. It seems to me that our educational duty of care to the writer or director 'overrides' our duty of care to the producer – we don't want to let the producer make mistakes that 'force' mistakes on others. And that is probably as it should be – except for the producer.

Conclusions

So where does that leave us with producers?

From a pedagogic point of view the key thing we must look for in a producer is the ability to identify and creatively resolve – in a word to negotiate - the contradictory forces that push and pull a film this way and that - the creative, logistical, temperamental and financial factors that require some compromise here and no compromise there. To be able to perform this role as it is performed in the real world the student producer must in the literal but also in the personal, creative sense, 'own' the project just as a 'real' producer owns a project. And it is here, precisely, that the attempt to empower creative producers in a film school context becomes exceedingly difficult, and if not impossible, probably undesirable.

Firstly because as we have seen the film school producer is likely to lack sufficient skill and experience to secure or indeed to deserve the level of trust and partial ceding of autonomy that must actually exist for a genuine producer-writer or producer-director relationship to function. Given that as teachers we will almost certainly intervene to and protect their collaborators and prevent them making what we deem to be dangerous mistakes, any apparent will in any case be largely fictional.

Secondly the underlying reality of the film as both cultural artefact and commercial relationship doesn't exist in the film school context (or if it does is really only a simulacrum) and I suspect most of us would argue it absolutely shouldn't. But the difficult truth we must accept in considering the real role of the producer, however creatively engaged, is that they must address the work as both artwork and tradable product, they must act as ambassadors for the

work and the filmmaker in the domain of finance but also act as representatives of the financers and distributors in the domain of the filmmaker.

The producer must develop the ability to face both ways and to learn this they have to be trusted both ways – that is they must be given something to sell to the world AND they must have something to sell to the filmmaker – they must have some traction in both worlds. Excepting the rich and/or well connected the student producer generally has neither of these things and can only fall back on the practical skills of managing the production process.

Thirdly the central creative position of the director in film-making is at its purest form in film schools where the material context that gives the creative producer a prominent role in the real world is at its weakest and so, in any discussion about who to 'empower' in conflicts over story, interpretation, casting, editing etc, it is likely to be the director who will be given licence and the producer who will be constrained. Similarly with writers in the development of projects.

We have tried to create some of the situations which creative producers must navigate in order to develop the balance of soft and hard skills needed in the real world, but these are artificial constructs. A director needs a DOP, a designer, an editor (although many claim otherwise) but it is difficult to honestly claim that, in school, they *need* a creative producer. But producers absolutely do *need* to engage in a creative role with writers and directors or they will have nothing to do but production manage.

Possible solutions

So this leads us back to the problem of equipping creative producers with the experience of learning to resolve the dialectic of art, market and practicality. If these insights can only be gained through experience, project by project, can producers only learn 'on the job'? Must we then sacrifice any systematic, critically and historically informed film school pedagogy for creative producers?

One solution, taking the would-be producer to the real world, is to institute an apprenticeship model (echoing one of the implicit functions of the studio system which no longer exists, certainly in a UK context) to give aspiring producers a structured opportunity to observe and interrogate the myriad 'tacit' forms of knowledge and skill that make up the producer's weekly schedule. In this respect a single lunch could be worth half-a dozen lectures. Indeed quite a few established producers undertake this mentoring role informally (but also highly selectively, choosing their apprentice with utmost care and not simply to satisfy the placement needs of educational institutions). Beyond passive learning by observation this model also requires 'live' projects for the producer to work on that are outside the film school economy but supported by film school staff.

Another solution, bringing the real world closer to the aspiring producer, is to extend the film school into the marketplace, acting as a development house/production company but with a clear separation between the protected space of 'school' and the freer reign of market forces in the 'incubator'.

[Knowing the tiny proportion of scripts and projects that ever see the light of the projector I have to date resisted attempts by colleagues in our University's commercialisation department to pursue this kind of activity as a source of revenue. But as an incubator for writers and producers skills there is a stronger rationale for this kind of arrangement as long as no-one expects it to make money!.]

There are clear and present dangers, however, in blurring the boundaries between our role as educators, in which the development of the individual with equal regard for each student, gives way to the selective promotion of only the most promising and/or marketable project. To prevent excessive commercial realism contaminating the proper independence of the film school as a creative space, we would need to secure a clear demarcation, possibly including personnel, between the teaching and the incubator functions.

In conclusion I would just stress that these are very much provisional reflections on the first five years of our postgraduate producers courses and I very much look forward to hearing and discussing colleagues experiences over the course of this congress.

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