

TEST SEMINAR

Tools for European Screenwriters' Training

A few thoughts on an Integrated Approach

by
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Introduction

The gap between the personal and artistic dimensions of European audiences and European film-makers, highlighted in the TEST proposal is one which has been evident from the beginning of the MEDIA programme. The gap may be seen differently in the UK compared with Denmark, or Greece, but the need to bridge this gap in order to create sustainable film production in Europe is clearly important.

These few thoughts are written with the aim of highlighting how by using existing organisations and institutions both within and outside the film sector, we could deliver an integrated, cost effective, system of training and education for screenwriters in Europe.

In 'Developing UK Film Talent'¹ a survey of film skills and needs within the UK it was recognised that there is no level of training, or area of above-the-line-production, which does not need an increase in training provision. This is reflected not only in the on-going failure of the vast majority of film productions(over 600 feature films have been made in the UK in the last six years) but also the lack of diversity in the workforce, skills shortages, disparate course provision and vast regional imbalances. Similar reports on screenwriting in France, and MEDIA's own research, plus a review of the top box office films in each European country illustrates that this is not a problem limited to the UK.

In the past this has been put down to a number of factors ranging from the lack of European international film stars, lack of production finance, the lack of powerful exhibition and distribution companies, the inability of film-makers to make genre films, problems of language, lack of training etc.. However, the one key aspect everyone has agreed on is the need for good screenplays, which are the foundation for great films that connect with modern audiences. Therefore, this paper seeks to put forward a strategy, which will improve the quality of screenwriting in Europe.

The Need for an Integrated Training Strategy

For over a decade European screenwriter training has been a combination of on-the-job experience, which has been supported by an expansion of development funding, combined with various production support mechanisms, and intensive screenwriting workshops. The latter have been the main focus for MEDIA training spending, and as a result a focus for many national/regional government initiatives/support systems e.g. bursaries to attend these courses.

¹ 'Developing UK Film Talent' 2002 UK Film Council/Skillset

This paper is too short for me to go into why these various schemes have had limited success but the key problems are I believe

- The majority of screenwriters lack basic skills and training
- Training has been divorced from formal education e.g. Film Schools
- A lack of adequate development support for first-time film-makers
- The dominance of government subsidy finance with its attendant non-commercial emphasis
- The dominance of television companies in the commissioning of feature films
- An underdeveloped understanding of how film genres and other key elements of film work
- An over reliance on writer-directors
- A lack of adequate training for those working in development including directors and producers

In this context no single scheme or initiative, nor a simple change in the way we train will address the scale of problem we face. What we need is a recognition of the scale of change required, and an integrated approach at national and European levels which makes best use of all our resources, and provides a training and education system for producing great film works.

This involves identifying the different levels of training required and then going for a 'best fit' review of existing training/education providers. In some cases this will mean new possibilities, new funds and refocusing organisations.

The following notes are a brief overview of how an integrated system which identifies four different levels of screenwriter training could be established, and provide the basis of a radically different training and production landscape over the next three-five years.

Each country, and region, will have some aspects of these four levels provided for in existing programmes. However, if one or more levels is missing then organisations, individuals and production companies are inevitably faced with providing lower level skills to replace the level of training that the screenwriter has not received before.

The aim of creating this four tier approach is to save time and resources in production, and development funds, not being spent on trying to provide inexperienced screenwriters with the support to become skilled screenwriters. It will also ensure a greater diversity as talented individuals who do not have the money/support to pursue a career will have access to good skills training and the chance to show their potential.

Four Levels of Screenwriter Training

A key to providing effective training is to understand the different levels at which it is needed, and identifying the different organisations which are capable of providing it.

The following four levels provide a framework with which anyone can progress from knowing nothing about screenwriting to updating a lifetime of experience.

1. Introductory

Aims: to provide knowledge about screenwriting and film production, which may or may not be directed towards production, to a general public or students interested in film.

Objectives: to provide short accessible low cost courses and information with a high level of industrial back up for the general public and those interested in a career in film.

e.g., Introduction to screenwriting courses in UK

2. Establishing

Aims: to provide specific introductory skills and specialist pathways for those who have made a commitment to a career in film.

Objectives: long courses involving practical work, theory, and master classes on aspects of screenwriting and production.

e.g. Film School degree courses, including postgraduate.

3. Transitional

Aims: to provide targeted training to key film industry entrants who have proven their commitment and potential ability but need support and development to achieve their initial career goals.

Objectives: tailored first-time film-maker courses, plus workshops etc., of varying lengths aimed at developing a range of screenplays.

e.g. screenplay development workshops,, actor's and director's workshops.

4. Developmental

Aims: to provide short course tailored to individuals needs for up to date existing industrial knowledge and practice

Objectives: master classes, conversion courses for writers from other mediums

e.g. case studies, adaptation courses.

The Training Providers

The range of possible providers can ensure that if each organisation focuses on particular aspects / levels of the need this will allow, after an initial set up period, for a comprehensive training approach.

At an **introductory level** the key factors are accessibility and cost. This can be met by either direct subsidiary e.g. the UK Film Council's First Light(aimed at young disenfranchised people) for specific target groups or by life long learning programmes which are subsidised by central government and have the additional benefit of being cost effective, open access and capable of being created in every corner of Europe.

Key issues: The need for reliable and up to date course materials.
 The need for effective informed tutors.

These two needs can be met by Training the Trainer courses, and the support of regional and national skills centres.

The **establishment level** is the most costly owing to the numbers involved, the diversity of skills to be taught and the need for some production to be undertaken. Logically this level should rest with the Film Schools, who have the resource base but will need substantial enhancement at the post graduate level if graduates are to enter the industry with a solid foundation in their particular specialism.

Key Issues: Regional and national disparity in provision
 The dominance of directing over screenwriting and producing in Film Schools
 Lack of introductory course structure to support higher levels of work at film schools
 Lack of sufficient funds for production in some Film Schools
 Lack of sufficiently trained tutors

The provision of the introductory level is essential, in the medium to long term, to sustain high quality graduates from diverse backgrounds.

One of the most difficult levels of training is the **transitional stage** of people's careers. Having achieved some level of skills, these now need to be applied within an industrial context. However, the needs of screenwriters are radically different from those of a producer and directors. Therefore, this level is best dealt with by specialist training operators at a national or European level.

Key Issues: Regional/national disparities
 Level of courses not suited to applicants
 High cost of short courses for freelancers
 Negative attitude to training post establishment stage.
 Limited range of courses.

This is the least well-served area with the highest overheads and the weakest coordination arising from the separate, often competitive nature of the current course providers. Therefore, a vital role for MEDIA and other funders, is to identify need, evaluate courses, and subsidise either course provision or attendance.

Finally, the European film industries are still emerging from a period of rapid expansion, collapses, and the needs of the people, who are now established, create a substantial **developmental** training problem.

Key Issues: Negative attitudes to training in some areas
 Lack of subsidy for attending courses in some countries
 Lack of targeted provision past the establishment/
 transitional levels
 Lack of focus in course provision

This level needs a substantial review of provision and the leadership role of key trainers and training organisations is critical at this stage. Key seminar speeches, and conferences such as TEST must be used to focus industry professionals in their need for up to date knowledge and skills for screenwriters.

In particular, short courses for professional/established screenwriters should be tailored to their needs, and case studies of development, and in depth seminars on key aspects of screenwriting should be created to assist the effective development of successful screenplays.

Conclusion

These few thoughts are obviously merely suggestions as to how the limited resources available to screenwriter training and the development of screenplays can be best used.

Obviously there are big questions to be answered within this framework, not least of which are the level of additional funding to be made available by the various regional and national film funds, MEDIA, and independent film/TV companies.

However, I believe that without an integrated approach, the desire to improve the quality of screenwriting in Europe will be thwarted, and the ambition to connect with European audiences never realised.