Beck Road, London, 2021. Road closed for the filming of *Slow Horses* for Apple TV+.

Questions of imagination and process: The potential of film practice pedagogy to challenge existing modes of production in the context of the climate emergency

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It is now accepted that current film production practices are unsustainable and new formulations need to be found that address the climate crisis. The issue's primary reporting is concerned with industrial film productions, which is undoubtedly important, but this top down approach needs to be balanced with more inclusive and imbedded solutions. Therefore, a pedagogic perspective, which considers whether learning initiatives can influence production methods, is timely. This article proposes that through this engagement alternative practices can be developed.

An anecdote, warning and possible future?

Recently, walking towards Winchester Cathedral I was struck by the light emanating from a portion of the grounds. My first thought was that this was daylight, though knowing full well that this was not possible at that time of the evening. It was only when I registered the hum of the lighting rigs and chug of the diesel generators that I realized this was night-for-day filming for the Netflix production *The Crown* (2020). It is only when you are on or near a film set that you realise how

much power is required to sustain standard film productions, which is in addition to the sheer number of personnel that have travelled to the location and the equipment and logistical support. In the face of the human made climate emergency (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2021) film and television, as with all industries, needs to immediately reassess its practices.

Though there *has* been a renewed focus on sustainable production practice, which has been sparked in part by reports such as that produced by the BFI in 2020 (Barratt 2020) – for instance, environmental coordinators and sustainability managers are now becoming commonplace on bigger budget productions – but there is still a resistance to change with 'a tendency to stick with tried and tested production methods' (Barratt 2020: 11). Perhaps even more worrying is the perceived insurmountable reality that 'a production can only reduce its carbon footprint by about 10-15% before they reach barriers beyond their control' (Barratt 2020: 65).[1] But critically, whilst most conversations and initiatives focus on a more sustainable *implementation* of the artistic 'vision', what they do not do is to consider an *adaptation* of the vision itself. There is a reluctance to tell 'creatives' how to create and to impose restrictions that will inform their work, but yet restrictions have always been there in some form, whether budgetary, logistical, health and safety related or even ethical, but these are traditionally seen as something to *overcome* rather than something to *embrace*.[2]

A philosophical, conceptual and aesthetic shift leading to a cultural change in industrial filmmaking is required. Such a change could (and should) have its roots in film education, a space that is strongly situated to promote such a turn, concerned as it is with exploring and encouraging new ways of thinking and doing, which should not be constrained by an industrial film model.

There are numerous additional benefits to shifting away from the unsustainable industrial model. For example, there is the potential to enable new voices and forms and to find and grow different audiences. It is now commonly known that the UK film industries have a lack of diversity and favour those from a particular socio-economic group and with the required social capital (Brown 2017; BFI 2017). Initiatives to readdress the balance are often top down (Yamato 2019), but a bottom up approach, where existing barriers and structures are no longer as impenetrable is arguably the most effective path to a lasting change.

With the advent of affordable digital cameras and editing software there was a hope that the democratization of the technology might 'democratize' production and make it more accessible, however the lack of any discernible change in the film industry demography has demonstrated how the technology itself is not enough to determine a shift within such entrenched structures. Film education should address this situation critically and conceptually and become an effective space for the next generation of filmmakers to develop their voices and considered response to the current social, cultural and environmental situation.

Film should always be practised

If you observe any film set it quickly becomes apparent that it is a business that employs many individuals. Looking at the credits on even a small-scale production amplifies the impression that filmmaking is a labour-intensive undertaking and hierarchal and collaborative activity.

In any discussion of this nature there is a tension between pragmatism, the realities of production, and idealism, how it could potentially develop. Film – be it 'artistic' or 'commercial' or however it is classified – is the creative, sometimes

1.   Production (and post-production) is only one part of the conversation, with concern over the carbon footprint of streaming services being another (Carbon Trust 2021).

2.   A recognition of 'over-production' has been made in the past by independent filmmakers. For instance, Dogme 95 manifesto that deliberately challenged production norms. At the time this was perceived as an artistic provocation, pretence and/or prank (depending on your point of view). However, it is interesting to consider that if this were enacted today that part of its drive might be to advance sustainable practice, as well as being an expression of creative criticality (and self-promotion).

critical, use of image and sound recording and editing technologies. In this there can be a tension between art and commerce, with more technological resources requiring more finance – when the scale of the *Lord of the Rings* investment is considered it is apparent that a financial return is expected. However, it is important to differentiate art and commerce and understand them as connected but separate entities that have mutable definitions and address them according to intentionality. Undoubtedly up-scale undertakings will always be part of the filmic realm, but the logic of continuing unquestioned and unsustainable practice and of replicating this mode for other types of production should be challenged.

The last eighteen months have been dominated by a global pandemic, which has impacted the private and professional spheres in previously unimagined ways. In response to this film production companies developed protocols that facilitated an adaptive way of working. And what was initially a fundamental problem that closed down the industry became an opportunity to re-think how to propose productions, for instance size of a crew and how it was deployed. These new standards were soon adopted by arts and creative universities, so a balance between Governmental directives and creative interaction could be found. Prior to this, on the Arts University Bournemouth's Film Practice MA, we (and other members of staff) had been endeavouring to design projects that encouraged the development of reflective and adaptive practitioners. The pandemic indicated that 'universalists' (with specialist interests) were able to think through the inherent production problems, for instance two-metre social distancing, and find an appropriate method of response.

This way of thinking through practice has embraced 'creative parameters' as a means to provoke 'economic' production engagement, in terms of being conceptually ambitious but practically realistic, and encourages individual and collective thinking, for instance the design and use of modular sets and locations. Within a pedagogical framework 'creative parameters' prompts students to de-construct their ideas and promotes both focus and clarity of authorial intent.[3] Through this, solutions to the imposed 'limitations' – for instance size of crew, number of actors, locations and script pages – are sought that sees production economy a creative research and resolution.

This model emphasizes the importance of *ideas* and their *exploration*. This may sound self-evident, particularly in an educational context, but often production 'necessity', a desire to replicate 'professional' standards, actually facilitates derivative work. If we encourage students to be critical and independent, to make timely work, why do so many student productions follow *worst* practice – a state of affairs that is accentuated by the need to produce a *recognizable* graduation film, one that mimics mainstream productions. This approach belies the fact that our engagement with 'the illusion', and our suspension of disbelief, is not dependent of technology, but on how coherent the filmic world is that is presented to us, which results from depth of research, conceptual thinking, the presentation of authentic voices.

The *recognizable* graduation film is an avoidable outcome, but for this to change it requires the acknowledgement of education's adherence to 'false' professional standards (in the learning context). Academia should be a place for experimentation, exercises that explore possibilities, that suggest alternative ways of thinking and articulate different voices, which in time can be further developed and find professional fruition.

The promotion of 'standardization' also supports received notions of employability, which is now a key marketing variable. But as important as specialist knowledge is, 'soft' transferable skills are now deemed just as desirable; the skills found in research and collaboration, being adaptable and aware are prized by potential

3.   For instance, during the *One Plus One* project the Film Practice students were asked (amongst other things):

When is a moment best led by image or sound?

When should a shot be cut? When should another shot be added?

How does framing aid storytelling? What makes camera movement meaningful?

What does soundscape add? When is dialogue required?

How do production details (e.g. props, costume) relate intentions?

The production of Peter Engelmann's MA Film Practice resolution project *Triangle* (2021, AUB) in Budapest, Hungary.[4]

4.   An example, amongst many, of this pedagogic ethos is Peter Engelmann's award-winning *Triangle* (2021), which developed through a series of creative exercises, workshops and regular tutorial engagement that resulted in 'Sci-fi pseudo-docu drama exploring the dark realms of the human mind. The story follows three strangers who – based on a 1997's psychological experiment on the bonds of friendship – are about to become friends for life, separated only by 36 questions' (IMDb n.d.).

employers.[5] This pedagogic approach can foster individuals 'who are creative and who look for answers in a super-complex society that demands creativity and their ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty' (Huet et al. 2013: 189). These students can become reflective practitioners who are able to consider the past and present and be a conscious part of any future.

If students, who are the future industry leaders, are asked to think in alternative ways, to re-consider the 'logic' of film wisdom this may start to have a positive effect in which different modes of thinking become more accepted, just like it is now largely understood that film must become more inclusive and diverse in terms of content and creation. This approach has specific purposes in an educational setting but when mapped to industry could help facilitate the pressing requirement that production decisions are measured in the context of the climate emergency and rationalize, even radicalize, productions.

Revitalised sonic space: Are podcasts a useful example?

Over the last year it seems that everyone has been indulging in boxsets and podcasts. The proliferation of streaming services, which allow their products to be consumed on numerous domestic platforms, attests to the promotion of consumer 'choice' and the importance of offering productions that entertain national and global audiences and in turn drive subscriptions. Their flagship serials, *The Crown* (Netflix), the impending *Lord of the Rings* (Amazon), *Mandalorian* (Disney) et al., indicate that filmmaking's centre of power may have shifted, but its ethos remains the same with the promotion of these serials being centred around their vastness and spectacle (BBC 2021).

The term podcast was coined in 2004, with the invention of iPodder, which allowed the streaming of internet radio. Since then, this form has grown in diversity and sophistication. Podcasts, being primarily an aural interaction, blur resource related production differentials and this allows for a bewildering array of shows; if you search any subject, for instance True Crime, you will discover offerings from established media companies and independent producers; many shows now have related websites and YouTube segments that add visual elements, but these are still subordinate to the original audio production. These works are all judged according to content (research and insight) and form (invention and presentation) – in this form what is 'seen' is first created and then imagined.

Part of this success is the mode of delivery, with its direct access to the listener via the smart phone, a mode of dissemination and sharing that has become ubiquitous. The success of this formulation may seem self-evident, it being a form of contemporary radio, but it is also in indication of what can be achieved when *some* distribution equivalence is achieved.

Recently, this sector has seen huge growth with Spotify, Stitcher, Apple and others investing heavily in content creation, but it is still a place where niche passions and celebrity vehicles share space. The question of renumeration is a pressing one, as it is across all digital platforms, and there is the desire to find different models of support, such as Patreon and Radiotopia, that foster independence.

Productions in this sector have been enabled by relatively inexpensive and accessible technologies and have a low resource footprint. Initially, this may not seem wholly relevant to film, but it does indicate that if form and content are placed to the fore of its critical discourse alternative types of production can be imagined and ideally integrated into existing industry processes and challenge accepted paradigms. It also demonstrates willingness for people to engage with their sense of

sound in relation to engaging content. In industrial film production, where there exists a gulf between considerations of image and sound, this should be taken as a motivation to readdress this balance.

A new relationship with sound

Although VFX is increasingly being used to conjure worlds and depict locations not visited (often as a result of budgetary rather creative considerations), shifting the process of visual *world-building* from production to post-production by itself does not necessarily make for a more sustainable industry, for convincing CGI requires vast computing power and large numbers of personnel, which are both ultimately unsustainable. This is therefore where we can reconsider our relationship with sound. In film, as in actuality, sound is the great illusionist. Sound, as one part of the audio–visual contract, requires *minimal* resources (Barratt 2020: 77), but yet has the ability to produce a believable reality in a way that the image cannot do so without *substantial* resources.

A key part of any turn would therefore be in promoting a more aurally attuned film culture by fully embracing sounds part in the audio–visual relationship – both in terms of helping to create a narrative filmic vision, but also in its often under explored conceptual and expressive potential. As commented on previously, podcasts have demonstrated an appetite for audio culture, one that is not currently capitalized on in industrial filmmaking. Beyond the question of sustainability this then also becomes about the artistic potential of the medium.

In film, sound helps us to create a living, breathing world. We can achieve this in off-screen sound by numerous strategies such as cause and effect (e.g., a wind blows, a car alarm goes off, a dog then barks in response), to the homogenizing effect sound has in helping bind a series of often disjointed images shot at different times and at different angles (such is the nature of film production) or even doing the reverse. Sound also expands screen space and provides important contextual information about the scene. And an active question from script through to production *should* be; *can these events be heard as opposed to seen?* In addition to the primary goal of sustainability, the added advantage of such a question would be the possibility of tapping into the spectator's own imagination – an often-underused resource in a medium prone to voyeuristic tendencies and prescriptive imagery.

The creative and critical use of sound is not just illustrative. It leads and divides temporal space, expands and focuses micro and macro realms, internal and external experience, all that can be imagined and felt, but not necessarily seen. And for films that are concerned with visceral experience and spectacle first and foremost, a renewed focus on sound would mean no drop in potency, for sound enters us, it moves us, we are literally shaken by it – and though modes of exhibition have changed with the advent of streaming services, for all that is lost (the collective experience of cinema, to the scale of image projected on the big screen, etc.), online platforms do provide the potential for immersive audio to be delivered to the spectator through headphones, as is already being experienced by listeners to numerous podcast productions.[6]

The truly *effective* and *innovative* use of sound in film requires a conceptual engagement that is often lacking in an industry predominantly concerned with the image making side of things, itself partly informed by a historical and cultural bias to our sense of sight particularly prevalent in western cultures. Some films, of course, from feature to experimental, do use sonic means to suggest reflexive

6. Though for this to fulfil its potential would require a new consideration of sound in distribution as well, with specialist headphone mixes of the programme material being presented as an option for playback.

juxtapositions and unseen presences, for instance *Shooting Dogs'* (Caton-Jones 2005) massacre scene, where the abrupt silence of the baby crying is more powerful than anything we might be shown[7] or *Civil, Disobedience* (Raban 2004), which uses fragments of Margaret Thatcher's Belgrano speech 'integrated' into its soundscape, but unfortunately this approach is the exception rather than the rule. From Aristotle's primacy afforded to sight to the development of visual technologies in later centuries, like photography, lantern shows and film, where we can see visual culture taking the forefront, for example with the British Association Advancement Science (BAAS) stating back in the 1920s that it is *visual culture* that science is concerned with. On one level, and within a scientific context such as this, we can perhaps understand this stance, sound being naturally ambiguous and amorphous. However, outside of the laboratory and within a creative setting, these exact characteristics often produce the most impactful results.

This imbalance is further amplified within the Anglophone tradition, in cinema we can see this played out in the language of the medium; we talk about going to see or watch a film, whereas perhaps a more appropriate description would be to *experience* one. Whilst the order of credits in the industrial film model confirms sound as being considered a technical process first and foremost and therefore relegated to the lower tiers in relation to those concerned directly with image making such as cinematography, production design and picture editorial.[8]

Challenging this ocularcentrism by re-engaging with our sense of sound and shifting our imaginations from our sense of sight to our sense of sound would help facilitate this transition to enable a more sophisticated consideration of the audio–visual and the interrelationship between the two senses that we are primarily concerned with as filmmakers. In a pedagogical setting such as on the MA in Film Practice, posing challenging questions such as; 'if our relationship with our senses is partly structurally determined, and if this is one of the reasons we are where we are with regards to the imbalance, then why accept it?' or 'we begin with a sound, what do we see?' as well as introducing sound art, experimental film and cultures of field recording workshops to promote new ways of listening that can open up new avenues for exploration in their work.

Returning to Winchester cathedral, questions that aurally attuned filmmakers working in the context of the climate emergency might have asked prior to shooting could include; what needs to be seen?, what needs to be heard? where does the drama really lie here? is it in the voice perhaps? Is it in the events happening beyond the walls that can be more effectively described in sound?

Sound serves as a good exemplar when it comes to exploring new ways of thinking and doing because for the most part it is an underexplored and underdeveloped facet of filmmaking within the industrial model. Education is therefore exactly the place where a renewed focus on sound can and should be promoted and explored.

The potential for imagination

The climate crisis has provided an immediacy to reassess the industrial filmmaking model with regards to sustainability. The global pandemic has demonstrated that when the need arises the current industrial model *can* adapt, albeit minimally and through necessity of its own economic survival. This indicates all that is seen to be 'best' practice and/or 'common sense' (the established way of doing something) can actually be altered. However, questions of sustainable filmmaking in relation to climate change appear to be reluctantly addressed rather than embraced. Therefore,

7. This moment also demonstrates a sonic sensibility by the filmmakers, as they show an understanding of the powerful instinctive response we have to certain sounds.

8. This ongoing state of affairs has sparked a recent open letter from The Association of Motion Picture Sound (AMPS), Cinema Audio Society and Motion Picture Sound Editors (MPSE) calling for change (Lanzer et al. 2020).

Sun Pictures, Broome, Australia (2019).

a cultural shift is required, and with it provides the opportunity to consider new, inclusive and effective forms of filmmaking.

A generation ago Fredric Jameson, in 'The Seeds of Time', wrote that 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations' (Jameson 1998: 50). Written in 1996, Jameson's words addressed a new world – its corporate and national political and environmental global contest – which could no longer be divided according to the Cold War's oppositional duality. This development saw 'imagination' being exercised in the pursuit of capital, which was equated to 'freedom', and no longer the pursuit of fraternal equality, even if this had been initiated for the purposes of ideological propaganda.

Contemporary protest, such as Occupy and Extinction Rebellion, are largely a single-issue concern that feeds into a network of overlapping issues. This is manifest in often emotive tones, rather than ideological ones, which seems due to an understandable distrust of existing structures and formulations. This is a time of grand causes rather than grand political narratives; the latter now seem rather twentieth century or some form of crude imitation. But perhaps part of this lack relates to us, those of us in positions of some influence, and it is us who are imbued with this mindscape; we tell ourselves we are being realistic but of course this could be interpreted as being pessimistic and/or cynical.

David Graeber, who was a key part of the original Occupy protest, wrote in the *Utopia of Rules*, 'The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently' (Graeber 2015: 54). So, can individuals, maybe those who were born after Jameson's words were first published, imagine and navigate a different path? A generation earlier, other radicals, who sought to change the establish order of things, stated – 'Be realistic: demand the impossible'.[9] A new ethos can be incubated in the educational space, for this is where the next cohort of practitioners can safely explore fresh ways of thinking and making, which challenge existing methods, 'realities' and hierarchies, and produce work that develops a new ecological, cultural and social sensibility, and imagines the impossible. What other way forward is there?

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9. Slogan from Paris, May 1968, which is often attributed to Situationists.

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