The 21st Century Film, TV & Media School:

DIRECTING THE FUTURE

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The 21st Century Film, TV & Media School: DIRECTING THE FUTURE
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Directing Actors for Non-Directors: Creative Research Strategies for Fiction Films

Edwin Culp

Throughout film history, many famous scenes and even entire films have been devised with actors improvising on certain general parameters that ultimately depict a character, often vaguely portrayed. These turns to improvisation and narrative experimentation tend to come forward every time filmmakers propose a new rupture, frequently accompanied by technological changes that have made the filmmaking process cheaper or more immediate. From their uncomfortable pauses, mumbled dialogues and candid unawaresness, fresh emotional intentions emerge in filmmaking every certain time as refreshing new waves. Digital technologies have recently furthered the issue, as they allow filmmakers to make cheaper and more immediate productions that rely heavily on the work of actors and their ability to react to unexpected circumstances.

Despite being one of the most creative resources readily available to young emerging filmmakers, a didactic approach to actor-director tools as a creative research approach is rarely taken into account in filmmaking courses and curriculum. Even more uncommon is for these courses to go beyond the training of directors to efficiently obtain a specific result from an actor. To devise an improvisational mechanism that embraces the mistake, the accident and the error in a film school environment usually focused on virtuosity is not a minor challenge. In this paper, I argue that by using acting techniques and improvisation strategies to impregnate the whole film production and learning process, directors and also cinematographers, art directors, image and sound editors – can devise an experimentation space to explore creative aspects of fiction filmmaking. First, I will go over the main points where the techniques for Directing Actors can be useful for filmmaking students (and professionals alike). Then, I will present two exercises that I have used in my own teaching experience.

Non-Directing Actors: Towards a Laboratory for Fiction.

A few years ago, I was asked to teach an elective class on Directing Actors for our BA program, not having one in our core curriculum. It was meant as a course for directors, but other film students enrolled. This brought up an unexpected challenge: to make the tools in Directing Actors helpful to train not only directors but cinematographers, art directors, sound designers or editors in their tasks and their creative processes.

One of the most pressing issues we face at my school is how to get the students involved with creatively researching their story or subject to deepen their approach and experiment with it. As Michael Renov recently brought up at a creative research conference, film schools give little space for students to experiment and learn from failure (Renov 2018). Even more so in fiction courses. Documentary and animation classes are more prone to experimentation and the productive use of failure, but the apprenticeship structure of fiction puts the emphasis in planning ahead, underlining the work with scripts, storyboards, pre-visualizations and even rehearsals with actors – all to achieve efficient performances. Because fiction filmmaking – at least apparently – requires the people involved to have clearer goals.

1 The first version of this text was presented at the 2015 CICTE Conference: “Directing Actors.” I would like to thank the audience and colleagues for their questions and feedback. I also want to thank Luis Fernando Zubiera, MFA Film student at Thea, for his insightful inputs and discussions on this project both as an actor and director.
schools are not inclined to set an organized path for students on the fiction track to gradually and creatively learn from their mistakes, without framing it in an ideal of efficiency and efficacious training on the set and the filmmaking process, without tending a safety net where they can learn and experiment with low consequences.

Fiction training can profit from more spaces where students are able to explore and experiment through methods specifically designed for it. The documentary film student is often a better fit to adapt to circumstances with less planning and more performance. This issue also relates to the fact that fiction is not normally enunciated in the subject matter we teach. Film school tradition tends to make fiction an explicit or natural form of film. While this can be suggested from a theoretical standpoint, it can lead to equating the crafting of fiction with the crafting of the film itself. When we name a class 'Film Language' or 'Film Production,' we implicitly mean '[fiction] Film Language' or '[fiction] Film Production,' whereas documentary deals with the relation to evidence or truth, or the manner in which animation bargains with the composition and manipulation of time.

Teaching fiction is also placed in the tension between having the students learn how to structure, plan, preview and prepare for their shoot, or rather the emphasis on improvising, experimenting and performing on the set. The regular set of filmmaking courses—Screenwriting, Producing, Cinematography, and Directing—leads to a student-teacher dialogue and feedback loop to have the student be as prepared and ready to shoot as possible. Then through repetitive practice and by gaining experience, the students are expected to learn how to best react to the different situations they find themselves in. Class could provide more tools to experiment and research into the films to learn how to react to unexpected situations on the controlled and safe environment.

The skills developed through Directing Actors courses could help the student directors and other members of the crew develop other approaches to craft fiction; from creatively researching the theme to learning how to improvise, work with what they have and creatively researching the theme to learning how to improvise, work with what they have and not being afraid of making mistakes to avoid them, but rather be able to go deeper in what initially may seem like a failure until it becomes an innovative solution. These classes could also provide students with tools to explore the non-efficient elements in filmmaking: doubts, pauses, mistakes that can bring a richer life to plots. Students can also imagine ways to start a film other than screenwriting.

At present, Directing Actors classes are not necessarily already guided towards exploration or research of a given situation. They are often taught to provide the directing student with a set of tools to effectively reach their task. In fact, Judin Westen starts her student with a task of expressing the creative research and experimentation approach I propose (Famous Directing Actors' Book by making a point on how to fix what she calls 'Results Dis

Metz's famous formulation, "Every film is a fiction film," has been read in many different ways (Metz 1982: 83). See also (Baumeister 2010: 69ff.), while Kandoïre's formulation of fiction as a "system of representation and manipulation of time, similar to the work of the actor assembling forms and internally coherent signs," becomes more productive in terms of the work of the actor and the creative research and experimentation approach I propose (Kandoïre 2008: 156).

to achieve what has been laid out in the script or to build on the director's vision. Even when Directing Actors classes might reach into the inner workings of the actors, most of the fiction courses in film schools are seeking to take the students closer to the how the 'real world' works, tying them to the same processes and use of time as that of the industry. This promotes using pre-production time in casting processes to find the best-suited actor rather than using the time to develop a character or structuring well-thought scripts and planning time-pressed shootouts in place of collectively discussing and building the creative aspects of the film. Rehearsals are thought as a time to review and repeat aspects agreed with the different creative artists, thus easily becoming non-essential. Instead, they could become moments to create, explore, experiment, to try out new things, and not only to repeat. Students can easily learn to balance a planned and controlled setting with the true opportunity to experiment and research within the film school timeframe by working on planned and structured processes, but also on practical development, collective creation and real-time performance. And towards this end, existing Directing Actors courses are a readily available starting point.

Directing Actors books and manuals usually take some space to remind directors that actors are not only instruments or models, but that they are also an important part of the creative team of the film (Weston 1996: 201-233; DelKovon 2006: 157-166). Actors provide their imagination, memories, bodies, and voices to the character and much can be learned and discussed with them for the good of the project. Through their work, dialogues can be fixed, actors can contribute to new stage tasks, and even sometimes make some suggestions to develop a better script.

Perhaps we could look into directing actors beyond learning the best techniques on how to manipulate and deal with actors effectively but make them participants of the research process itself. Two simultaneous processes can be developed through this learning process. On the one hand, filmmaking students can learn how to involve their actors as co-creators of their projects, gaining further insight into them. Students can observe and work with actors to learn: 1. working with dramatic goals and their characters; 2. how to design and imagine what they may factor on-set; 3. how to learn from the characters and their relationship; 4. how to work with actors on a different level; 5. how to design camera movements with actors; 6. how to direct the camera; 7. how to work with different actors and different settings; 8. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 9. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 10. how to work with different actors and different settings; 11. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 12. how to work with different actors and different settings; 13. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 14. how to work with different actors and different settings; 15. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 16. how to work with different actors and different settings; 17. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 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98. how to work with different actors and different settings; 99. how to use the camera to create a specific mood or atmosphere; 100. how to work with different actors and different settings;
Impulses, Mistakes, Imagination: Acting Exercises for Creative Research

In my teaching, I have used two main exercises that help students research acting tools, become familiar with Directing Actors and some terminology and, more importantly, that help build a space of experimentation and exploration of fiction. The first one relates to the notion of the impulse, developing from a simple physical impulse—the idea of balance needed to start walking—to an imaginary one. This exercise can also be used to explore dramatic goals and needs, as well as dramatic actions and events. The second exercise helps develop detailed images that set up the scene on an emotional level that prepares the actors and can serve as a space to dialogue the different creative choices across the different Heads of Department. I then provide some guidelines to develop improvisational scenes taking these two exercises as the starting point. Feel free to modify and vary these exercises as much as you feel appropriate. These are not tight structures that have to be followed in a certain way, but ideas that I have tried to describe in detail that can only make work well when adapted to specific needs.

The Actor’s Toolkit

One of the first things I have found that is needed is filmmaking students is to de-mystify the work of the actor, to set up a more technical terminology for the students to communicate with their actors but also to be able to use that terminology in their own creative communication. Expressions that refer to acting as activities, “putting themselves in the character’s shoes”, and “represented a character” tend to produce an inaccessible vocabulary for acting that becomes cryptic to the students. The actors, rather, can reflect on the actor’s toolkit; the evident tools of the actor that directors can readily use, work, stress, and emphasize. Trying to avoid a specific acting theory on school, and certainly not trying to be exhaustive in this list, I propose to group the actor’s tools in the following way. The grouping is based on specific tools the actors have available, and I separated them having students who will work with actors in mind and not the other way around. In this way, each set of tools is a series of keywords so students can work with their actors through clear and concrete instructions. Whenever possible, I provide more references on the subject, though many times a single reference could easily fit more than one group.

* A note about how I came to these techniques and exercises. Acting (and Directing Actors) still has a way of learning and teaching as a trade. There are few systematized approaches to the craft. In practice, a large part of the learning process is performed rather than followed by a series of precepts. I was originally trained as an actor, with emphasis on what is called physical theatre. I learned how to work with physical movement and I learned how to work with the physicality of the character. In theatre, I worked as an actor, an assistant director and almost simultaneously I started teaching actors. Certainly, many of those exercises have been modified through my own teaching process, much as it is the way described by W. Benjamin in “The Storyteller,” “To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story” (Benjamin 1998: 88). In other words, teach it, perform it, direct it.

I learned most of what I have come to these exercises from my own teachers and the directors I worked with. Some of the ideas for the preparation exercises come from José Aruño Vargas’s classes. Miguel Ángel Rivero gave me the original basis to explore the physical impulses and disquiet, and the initial structure of the exercise and even the words used (Ver-Vol) come from his workshop sessions. I was later able to fine-tune this exercise while assisting Ricardo Diaz in his classes. I am also indebted to Alicia Sánchez and Miguel Rojas’s contact improvisation courses to further understand how impulse originates in the body and how it can be transformed. In her neutral mask class, Alicia Martinez taught me how to become aware of the accidents that constantly interrupt a scene. Finally, I could understand more about masked acting in the workshops taught by Ignacio Velarde and I got closer to my inner idiom in the clown lectures of Altor Resaun and Toby Park from Spymonkey.

* Simon Murray has devised another way to delve into the acting forms through a criticism of some of its keywords (2015).
1) Body, voice, and breathing. This includes relaxation, bodily conscience and presence (Ouida and Marshall 1997: 1-13). Students can easily identify and pick up on tensions in the actor’s body, challenges on the use of voice or excessive awareness of their bodies on camera. Actors usually work on these aspects as part of their everyday training, through meditation, or more complex exercises that link their bodies to images. Directors can approach these tools readily and simply by making the actor aware of the position of their body, their weight distribution, their breathing, the particular way they are using their voice, a dictation or presentation issue, etc. The work with the body, voice and the breathing of an actor can concretely help set the tone of the action – more contained or more historic in its simplest formulation.

2) Impulses, objectives, goals. This group includes all the motivations the actor has to work with to set a scene in motion; they can be physical or imaginary, they can come from the script or from the work with the director, they can be modulated and become more ambitious or more contained (Maerzon, 2013). This also includes the sequencing of goals, what is sometimes referred to as the character’s train of thought: going from one goal to another, after an encounter with an obstacle. The character’s intentions, which could eventually form a subtext, take a great part in the configuration of such goals. These skills tend to be at the starting point of improvisation, where precision especially when impulses or goals will change during the scene – is much appreciated. Actors trained in bio-mechanics, contemporary dance and contact improvisation tend to develop a particular awareness for the physical impulse (Braun 1969: 243-253; Paxton 1976; Novack 1988). Acting techniques based on textual analysis tend to make the actor very much aware of the character’s objectives and intentions (Merlin 2007).

3) The capacity to react, listen and take their time. Although it could be grouped with impulses, some actors may be able to set a scene in motion and then not listen and react accordingly to what their partners are proposing. A good metaphor is to have the actor listen carefully, to really pay attention to the unexpected, to the small details. This also involves being able to take their time to assume a new situation, to investigate their reactions in order to produce a complex emotion. It can also include taking into account the accidents and elements surrounding the fictional world: the discomfort of the crew observing them, their nervousness or tiredness, fortuitous events that may happen and integrate them into their acting. Though impulses, objectives, and goals are the starting points of improvisations, it is this ability the one that brings out the creative potential of the improvisation. Jacques Lecoq’s neutral mask or the work developed in contemporary clown would be ways to train this openness to the accidental (Lecoq et al. 2002: 36-46; Park 2017).^2

4) Images, imagination, memory. This group of techniques ranges from actors imagining – as if they were immersed in a point-of-view shot – the actions that their character would do right before entering the scene, all the way to what has been called emotional memory, basically the actor lending their own personal memo-

^1 A very powerful way to work with body consciousness is through Moshe Feldenkrais’ method (1981: 69-109).

^2 I find the techniques of Toby Park and Seymour particularly compelling. They were students of renowned clown master Philippe Gaulier, Lecoq’s alumnus and critic.

It becomes obvious that these elements never operate separately in the different acting techniques and methods, and most acting exercises will interweave a few of these skills and groups together. This grouping makes it simple for students to dissect specific problems in the performance of one of their actors, but they also relate to different skills they can develop for experimenting with fiction as I mentioned above. The students can detect the strengths and weaknesses of their actors within these five groups; no actor will be strong in all five of them but will rather have some of these more developed or other more challenging. They can also use these tools to strengthen a particular need for their project whether it is characterization and acting tone through the body and the voice, dramatic goals and points-of-no-return, deviations from the goal and changes in rhythm, richer images, or specific emotions.

Preparation: Awareness and Presence
Before beginning with the exercises, we need to get the performers to become more aware of their bodies and more alert of what is happening in their surroundings. Any typical acting warm-up or group game that can work. I will briefly describe a simple one, that can be used with filmmaking students that may feel uncomfortable with acting.

For these exercises, I will call anyone who is participating in the exercises a performer, regardless if it’s an actor, an acting student brought to the class for demonstration or – even better, in my opinion – a fellow filmmaking classmate. The state of awareness we need to con-
struct should be far from stressful, provide greater concentration, better listening of the rest of the team, and a more creative stance. The objective is to get them to recognize some of their bodily tensions and open-up their relationship to the working space and the group.

A very simple and effective way to start is by asking the performers to walk around the designated workspace. I find it more effective to work in a somewhat small space, as it forces everyone to be in a greater state of alertness just not to collide with the rest. It is frequent that performers start by looking at the ground and not making eye-contact with their peers. This is especially so with non-actors. At this point, I ask them to try to observe their walk without modifying it. They should become aware of how they are feeling and how that feeling is being reflected in the way they walk. It is not the time to break with their everyday state just yet. Then, I ask them to face forward and that when their gaze crosses that of a partner, to react to it. The only limit is to try not to issue a judgment, but an honest reaction. This also implies not letting the encounters go over the amount of time that they need. By this point, I can ask them to observe their bodies and the way they are moving through space now and to let themselves feel the sensations and emotions of this new state.

As I mentioned above, these simple exercises can also be complemented with any sort of group game that activates awareness. After a few minutes, the performers should establish a state of increased awareness, both of their bodies and of the others in the space. The goal is for them to be open to the possibility of the here and now – what we tend to call the presence of the actor – and to incorporate elements of their daily lives to use them for creation. This state should also improve its receptivity and communication with their peers.

Impulses and Reactions. Exercise 1

This exercise is based on an exploration of physical impulses, namely disequilibria and movement, that then evolves into an exploration of goals, points-of-no-return, dramatic actions, and dramatic actions, eventually into dialogues and improvisations. It derives from the exercises I learned from Miguel Ángel Rivera, director and teacher (1999). The sequence can be carried out on a single session or broken into as many sessions as the exploration requires.

The goals are, first, to ready provide the students with a specific terminology and concrete understanding of their actors and, second, to allow them to research the dramatic details of a scene. Students can work with already scripted material, try new variations or produce new material from the exercise. It can also help fine-tune existing goals and objectives.

The exercise begins with students being aware of the way they walk, particularly the moment when they start walking. I ask them to identify the exact moment when equilibrium is lost and is no longer going back, and a certain suspension of the body before the other foot has to come forward. Students have to try it a few times, trying to narrow down the feeling of disequilibrium, a physical point of no return. In the initial stages, students tend to look at the floor or their feet. It helps to ask them to look forward and set a specific direction they want to take. With actors, this exercise can be done using a simple forward-roll over a mattress, which would amplify the feeling of disequilibrium and suspension. An image that I have had particularly useful is to try to remember the moment when a roller-coaster is about to start descending the sense of equilibrium – the beginning of the fall – can be strongly felt in the upper part of the abdomen. With film-making students, I would make them go from a standing position – both feet aligned – and exaggerate a little the first step in order to identify the "roller-coaster" moment of disequilibrium. Not to make it a fall, they can picture an imaginary string pulling the top of their heads up and forward. The disequilibrium will become the impulse to start moving, and it can be easily extrapolated to the impulse to do an action or say a line of dialogue.

After they have identified the feeling, students can go back to their normal way of starting to walk without losing the memory of the bodily sensation and still trying to identify it in their smaller, more quotidian, walk. I devote some time to have the students follow a simple sequence: start walking, do a few steps, stop, find another direction and start over. The actions in the sequence should not overlap so they can take their time with each one. In this period, I ask them to be aware of how long the walk should last and when it should be interrupted. Sometimes the interruption comes from trying not to collide with another student, sometimes from loss of interest, or from wanting to take a different direction. In every case, they should take their time to stop and get a sense of the interrupted impulse before they change direction and start over. If they stay honest to their interest and the accidents happening, the length of the walk becomes the length of an imaginary need tied to the magnitude of the physical impulse. Students can practice long and short – large and small – impulses: trying to get to the other side of the room, or just taking a single step. It should always be related to the imaginary need to get somewhere and they should be open to interruptions and accidents. Rather than denying the interruptions and still maintaining their original objective as if nothing had happened, they have to assume the accident and deal with the sensation of not getting where they intended to. The idea is not to suppress the accident, but to treat it as a creatively exciting event.

Once students feel comfortable with tracing a few routes on the space and getting a sense of the magnitude of their impulse, I go back to working with the feeling of disequilibrium, the initial impulse. This time, I ask them to say the word ‘Go!’ at the exact moment of the first impulse of movement. Any point before or after the suspended moment will get the note of saying the word too early or too late. Common faults include: going even before starting to move or when they bend their knee to produce the disequilibrium – both too early or too late – or when the foot taking the step has touched the ground – being too late. I would usually demonstrate with one student to the rest of the group. It takes a little while to get a grasp of it, but usually, it is very evident for the group what happened, and it is easy to reach a consensus. Very often when the student hits the right moment, their voice would change a bit, coming out more projected. After I have demonstrated the exercises, I ask students to get in pairs, one being the actor or performer and the other would observe and correct, effectively becoming the director. They should obviously switch places after a few tries. If the students are definitely not getting close to grasping the sensation and synchronizing voice and movement, a third student can place their hand on the lower back of the performing student and give them a light push at the moment of the impulse. Students can also try to consciously do an early or a late ‘Go’, to better delimit the suspension moment. During these rounds, I give notes to the performing students, but more so to the students directing their partners. I observe if they have given a correct or an incorrect note to their partner and how they deal with it or their smaller, more quotidian, walk. The delay of the impulse causes a tremendous feeling of an absence in the performer’s
body as if we were blocking its natural flow. This might be useful when we are exploring the effects we may cause on our audience when we do not give them 'what they expect.' Similar elements of the exercise can be used again and again to explore the sides of the character.

Another variation is to re-introduce the length and magnitude of the impulse and see how that builds from one character to the next. Often, students keep on going after their body begins to relax and focus on their ideas. It is clearly showing that they should have stopped. Again, they can introduce the word 'Go' to the exercise to test the magnitude and direction of their impulses. They can then begin to imagine the feeling of dissonance and just say the word 'Go' to evoke the feeling of dissonance and just say the word 'Go' without moving at all. This last variation will be the beginning of a dialogue and of the next part of the exercise.

The next development involves students getting into groups of three, where two will perform and one will direct. One of the performers will imaginatively recreate the roller-coaster sensation—the impulse—and say the word 'Come.' The other performer will have received the impulse: they will react to it by moving forward and saying 'Go' (or 'Coming', if it makes more sense to have a coherent dialogue). Then they would advance as much as they wish, eventually reaching their partner, who is waiting for them.

An exercise introduces a new moment: the reception and response to the impulse, thus working on the students' capacity to listen and react honestly to what their partner is proposing. I sometimes start with the students close to each other then move them apart gradually.

Another effective way to develop herd listening and reaction abilities is to ask both students to hold hands and the 'Go' performer not to move while doing a 'Come.' It is also a way to avoid students getting too close, thus making the exercise more useful. The discomfort they may feel due to holding hands with their partner should not be annulled but used to develop the dialogue. They may also learn new skills that can be useful when they work together.

The exercise can also become part of the building-reaction cycle. Take advantage of any elements surrounding them to deepen the cycle: the strange feeling of being observed by others, the nervousness, etc. Find useful to reflect on all the emotions that you go through when interacting with others. This can affect them in different ways, from crying to laughing, depending on their personality.

Then you can go back to their memories of different emotions and react to them. Remember that the memory is a storehouse of emotions and memories. By reflecting on them, they will trigger a specific emotional response that can be used in the performance.

A final part of this exercise would be to have students stay static and engage in this 'Come.' - 'Go' dialogue and then make variations with other lines. 'I love you.' can fit well into this dynamic. And then, later, they can incorporate simple pieces of dialogue.

Through these exercises, the student while directing their partners should learn how to give simple and concrete acting notes to their fellow students. All the students should be able to observe and react to the actor's impulses. By moving on to the dialogue, the students can deepen their understanding of the character, their own identification, and the impulsiveness of the characters. This helps to create a more coherent and realistic performance.

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1 In Spanish, the word is 'Ven', making a little dialogue of a performer saying 'Come' ('Ven') and then answer 'Coming' ('Voy'). At this point, it is possible to try to substitute 'Go' with 'Coming' to make the dialogue more coherent.

2 I thank Bert Beyer for making this observation when he heard a preliminary presentation of this paper.
where it was, what called her attention on him and then go further into the details of whatever came to her attention. Then, they would move to the atmosphere: the time of the day, the way the place received light—if any—whether it was a cold or a warm day, the sounds present, etc. The director can move on to another moment with the other performer, asking, for instance, about the time when he thought she had become his friend. Both performers can feel free to contribute to their partners’ scene at any time, and the director can also straightforwardly question their respective partner: what they remember of other character’s moment, how they feel, etc. By working with the background scene, a mood can be set up to later develop a fully-fledged improvisation or to stop and discuss the plot.

Besides being an effective detonator for improvisations, shocking, or further exercises within the rehearsal, these tools can be useful for photographers, who can then build lighting, atmospheres, and points of view; production designers and art directors, can get to know and imagine the characters’ inner life, beyond what is explicitly stated in the script; sound designers can prioritize certain noises or atmospheres related to the emotions produced; and obviously, directors, they can deepen the relationship between the characters, learning more of what can trigger their emotional responses. The collective and non-imposing nature of the exercise makes it simple to truly research the film and its situations collectively.

Wandering around. A Few Guidelines on Improvisation

The exercises I have described above can both lead to working with improvisations afterward. As I have said, the impulses and listening exercise can be developed into a dialogue scene and the use of images can help set up the mood for further work. For improvisations, I would advise to bring actors to the rehearsal space and not abuse the use of crew members as performers—unless they will be the actual performers of the film. Crew members can observe the improvisations and later use them to discuss their own proposals and ideas in a more concrete manner.

To be able to use improvisations beyond the need to solve a scene in a certain way or to be more efficient during the shooting, the students need to work away from having the actors reach the character’s goals and more into moments when the objectives are not accomplished and the plot is stalled. These moments can help the students research into the pauses, the uncomfortable silences or the strange laughter that plot-driven research tends to omit. Also, accidents and seeming errors can be sources for valuable ideas, so the actors and the director should be open to observe and exploit them.

The traditional way to set up an improvisation is that the director gives each actor a specific goal their character wants to attain, usually somewhat opposed to the other character’s objective. The actors have to do everything they can to achieve their character’s goal. I tend to move away from this competitive improvisational setup, as it very much oriented towards dramatic actions—which we can explore and research while writing the script—and leaves out the moments of the characters wandering (and wondering) around the scene. As with the impulses and the interruptions that the performers found when a peer crossed their path, directors can be open about the characters abandoning their original objective, perhaps moving into another one or just being receptive to what this new objective might be. They can ask their actors to postpone or contain—as I mentioned with the physical impulses—their goal as much as they can. They can give directions to the actors during improvisation, to announce their original goals and thus ultimately develop richer and more complex dramatic arcs. They can work with images to produce the opposite emotions in a background scene to the ones that will be performed in the actual scene. For example, to work with romantic, falling-in-love images to prepare for a break-up scene, thus tending to postpone and enrich the original goal of the scene.

Researching a fiction film in this way becomes finding that a dramatic goal is not only about getting from point A to point B but the path from one point to another. Achieving a character’s goal is not the central objective, but to explore the path—and, perhaps, never reaching the goal—is.

Making Time for Rehearsals

Perhaps all I am proposing as a research path for fiction films can be reduced to this: rehearse as part of the research process and not only in the pre-production phase, do it even before the actors come in. It implies bringing (back) a theatre and dance tool into cinema, one that has served as a means to collectively investigate a subject or an existing play. In this way, students can try out and experiment different ideas and discuss them collectively, create narrative and approach to the story. Actors can become a true part of the creative process.

The setup of a Fiction Laboratory that works beyond the process of researching the story and scriptwriting could rely on the space of rehearsals as a general means to approach the subject or perspective, revising scripts, watching and discussing references together, analyzing and reading scripts, deviating exercises to further understand character impulses and their images, recording improvisations to find the best camera setups and movements, etc. So, in film schools, Directing Actors classes offered can readily turn into a research space and its tools can establish the grounds for the innovative and fresh filmmaking we often long for.

References


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