

Neither smoothed down nor polished up

Experiences with media production in class

by Wolfgang Richter

In our school (the private grammar school of the Herz Jesu Missionaries in Salzburg, Austria) in the 4th year of the AHS, one of the main emphases of the year's programme is the production of video films. Prepared by an initial experience in the 2nd year with animation films, pupils can build on prior experience. Over the years the way I set about the complex task has continued to develop. Basically it includes analysis of methods of making films, preparation for shooting by generating appropriate concepts, organisation of the teamwork and shooting, editing and sound. I still remember well the first attempts with film as a theme for the first time—that was about 10 years ago. What began with great enthusiasm often ended in fragmentary results. The reasons for that were planning for too lavish a content (set and decoration) and the time and effort involved, lack of agreement in the group, technical problems and finally too little time for “cutting”. Nevertheless some of the result are worth seeing. Learning from the mistakes the definition of the initial assignment was aimed at making a short film. Not only did the success quota of finished films rise with this limitation imposed, but there were the first-time competition entries and the first awards. One problem that always has to be solved anew is the fact that one teacher (who, in practice, has no great experience) is almost unable to supervise the many and various challenges. This is why I began to look for forms of organisation that offered some respite. The first step was working together with the Media Department of the Federal Ministry.

Two years ago, for the first time, I bound external partners into a project to a much greater extent: workshop days to optimise the screenplay (with Renate Holubek) and the introduction of the six groups for shooting and editing (with the Verein Spektrum) created optimal preconditions.

With the interdisciplinary project five different subjects were linked together which meant that on school-day Saturdays four hours were available. The actual shooting of themes from the bible was done by the groups on their own, some of them helped by a teacher as a advisor. Editing took place during classes and in pupil's free time.

A Model Project

These experiences triggered one of the next steps. The idea was to develop a model concept in which 1. the development of the idea was to be allowed more time and 2. each group was to have more supervision during shooting and editing. “Aktion Film” showed interest in cooperating and the Verein Spektrum agreed to work with us. We also had support from the Media Department of the Ministry. The intensive preparation of storyboard and screenplay resulted in initial ideas being raised at a number of meetings enabling, above all, further development by internal group discussions.

There was particular interest in not having the ideas of the young people either smoothed out or polished up by adults. We were all agreed that the concept should be as authentic as possible. We saw our task as advisors consisting of pointing out where problems might arise during filmic realization. The pupils themselves then had to decide whether to accept the suggestions or not. The exercise of shooting a one-minute film in a double period and then analysing it proved to be extremely helpful.

Apart from a good plot, quality in a film consists of transforming plot action into pictures by means of takes (total to detailed close-up, camera perspective and movement) and their order/sequence so that the viewer is guided through the story in an interesting/funny/exciting way.

In addition today, the following exercise in 6, 4-person groups:

- Narrate a theme by turning it into pictures. The film should be no longer than 1 minute.

Video Workshop 4c

Group members
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Camera
.....
.....

Title
.....
.....

- ⊙ Time limit: 30 minutes
- ⊙ Shoot one of the two themes:
 - a) Examinations. A pupil (two) is/are caught cheating by a teacher.
Or
 - b) My route to the classroom (starting in the street)

- ❖ 1st hour
 - + 10 minutes for planning / simple storyboard
Assignment of tasks
 - + 20 minutes for filming : length: 1 minute. No more!

- ❖ 2nd hour: (5 mins. for each film)
 - + showing the film
 - + discussion / comparing results

- ❖ Home work
 - Use the chance to work on your video in groups of four with professional help.
 - Large groups should therefore split up /re-form.
 - Develop the story further (character of the protagonists, motivation for their actions).
 - (How) Can the viewer understand what is happening?

Tear off here to take with you.

What you need to know about the theme of film and video / interesting link:
<http://www.mediamanual.at>.

An analysis of a scene from "The Birds" by Alfred Hitchcock serves as a discussion focus about basic methods of making film/video.

Film analysis

Scene from Alfred Hitchcock: "The Birds."

While looking at the film, bear in mind the following points and make as exact notes as possible about your observations. The methods are what is important here, as we discussed in our example "Nordsee ist Mordsee."

Group 1: Camera positions/takes

Which takes are used in the film scene and in which order?

Long shot (LS), Medium Long Shot (MLS), Mid-shot (MS), Close-up (CU), Extreme Close-up (ECU), Detail (D)

Group 2: Camera Movement

Note the camera movements in order
(Fixed, pan, travel)

Group 3: Camera Perspective

Note the camera perspectives and the order in which they are employed.

Group 4

Make a note of the takes in order

Group 5: Editing

Make a list of the number of cuts

Group 6: Sound

Which “sounds” are use in the film sequence? What is their relationship to the pictures?

With the revised concepts we then spent two half days shooting.

What was new was that each group was assisted by a advisor. Thus during the shooting of some scenes there was a lot of discussion which led to small—and sometimes larger—changes.

Begin:

Thursday 7.50 a.m. Meeting point: Class 4c

till about 1.30 p.m.

Follow up Work:

Friday 7.50 a.m. Meeting point to be agreed with advisor. Till about 1.30 p.m.

Plan of Organisation

	Theme	Team leader	Location(s)	Advisor
1	Leap of Fate	Ruprecht	Schule	Vera Laner
2	Caught Smoking	Tradler	Schule	Wolfgang Richter
3	Repeating the Exam	Hauthaler	Schule	Heimo Bauer
4	No drugs no probs	Pelka	Schule	Carina Simader
5	Superman	Wolf	outside / LNK School	Clemens Haider
6	Perlious Business	Markl	Mönchsberg Europark	Martin Seibt

Where extra shooting time is needed please plan for yourselves.

All material must be available by Tuesday (= editing day).

Please bring sound material on Tuesday too.

Editing: Tues. 16th Mar. 7.50 a.m. – approx. 1.30 p.m.

Meeting point: Drawing room.

2 of the team edit, the rest are responsible for documentation (material can be prepared).

Documentation:

1. + 2. and 5. + 6. hours in the lower EDP room.

All texts should be written on the PC so they can be edited for the documentation.

Bring texts and rough drafts on a diskette on Tuesday or send them to my e-mail address by Monday.

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The following texts will be needed for the project documentation:

1. Origins of the idea, changes up to the final version (content)
2. Report about work in the group.
3. Reportage about shooting days.
4. Blurb: short version, what it's about and who did what.
5. Storyboard
6. Final version of screenplay.
7. If anyone thinks of anything else...please be creative.

Storyboard will be assessed for Art Education, other texts for German.

For editing there was a multi-media work station (lent by Verein Spektrum) and supervision (Adobe Premiere) available for each group. Between 5 and 8 hours work were needed to produce the final version. For some groups that was not enough time. Their complicated concept needed twice the allotted time.

While in previous years there was only one editing workstation available (during class hours and free time) for all groups so that it took place over a period of weeks, this time (almost) everything was completed in one day.

The density and intensity of the work processes in this project was bound up with great organisational—2 half days, 1 full school day—and financial—5 supervising staff—and without monetary support it would not have been possible.

An overview of the running of the whole project is given in a summary of the whole process:

Schedule:

(Art education [AE] every Friday 7.50 a.m. – 9.35 a.m., in addition in the German class, in selected periods themes about the subject of film)

Fri. 9.1.2004 AE (30')	Project preliminary discussion formulating first ideas
Fri. 16.1. AE	Form groups More precise formulation of initial ideas. Write treatment.
Thurs. 22. 1.	Design elements of film using "Nordsee = Mordsee" (Hark Bohm) as an example Preliminary conference with Aktion Film, Verein Spektrum. Work out concept for workshop
Fri. 23. 1. AE	Discussion of treatment with Martin Seibt Basic framework of a film production using "Bernds Finale" as an example.
Fri. 30. 1. AE Kurze	Film short story. 30' allocated. 6 groups of 4: a) School exams. A pupil (two) are caught cheating by the teacher. Or b) My route to the classroom (starting in the street) 1. UE 10' for planning, 20' to film: length 1 min. Goal: Transformation of a simple plot into images 2. UE Discussion of results Homework: study www.mediamanual.at . studieren
Fri. 6.2. AE	mediamanual feedback Develop screenplay in groups Make storyboard. Individualised discussion of screenplays (Renate Holubek?) Who agrees to produce the final version of the screenplay?
(Semester holidays)	
Fri. 20.2. AE	Complete screenplay Complete storyboard Individualised discussion of the screenplays (Renate Holubek)
Fri. 27.2. AE	Organisation planning in groups Fixing who is responsible for what Test shooting Film analysis using selected examples
Fri. 5.3. AE	Clearing up open questions

Thurs. 11. 3. 1. 7.50 a.m. – 1.30 p.m.	1st day shooting 1 advisor per group 2nd day shooting 1 advisor per group Editing day 1 advisor per group Project documentation (feedback, blurb, project report, text for credits...)
Fri. 19.3. AE	Completion of project documentation Designing the video cover
Tues 25. May	Presentation of the project <i>Aktion Film, Imbergstraße</i>

From a pupil's point of view the project looks like this:

Our film project

About one and a half months ago we learned from our AE teacher Wolfgang Richter that there was to be a joint film project with "Aktion – Film Salzburg". Of course the enthusiasm of my classmates was enormous because up to that point we had only made a short animation film. But now we could make a real ten minute film with professional support from film students and others during shooting and editing.

First of all Mr. Richter explained camerawork to us using two films, "Nordsee = Mordsee" and Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds". This included travelling shots, pans and other camera movements and how one can shoot individual sequenced best. After this, the new knowledge was used to make a test film. There were two themes to choose from – either "The Aay to School" or "Caught Cheating". On the basis of these first short films Mr. Richter told us where the work was successful and what one could improve. After this introduction to the "film business" we formed small groups to consider what theme we should use in our film and what the message, "the moral of the story" of our film, should be.

In order to give us some help with the decision, Martin Seibt visited us the following week. We discussed the initial ideas and stories with him. On the basis of what we learned here rough drafts of storyboards were drawn, masses of screenplays typed and many roles assigned. Nevertheless there were still many unanswered questions about "little" things which were then clarified in discussion with Frau Holubek who took the time to come to Salzburg from Vienna. Prior to this she showed us a documentary about the various important areas of work in shooting a film and how many hours of work went into a single scene.

In the last two or three weeks that remained after this talk the necessary props were collected, the final version of the storyboards drawn, screen tests made and shooting permits obtained. This period of preparation was actually the hardest time of the whole project. At last it was finished and on Thursday 11.3 and Friday 12.3 ten periods were cancelled for shooting. Each group had their own advisor, members of "Aktion Film", and the necessary equipment—camera, tripod, microphone and lights—was also made available for us. We spread out over the whole school and school grounds and since some of us planned to shoot in the old town we went there too. Before that, of course, we had to prepare the locations prior to beginning. On the second day of shooting many groups were finished early. They then reviewed the uncut film.

We really thought that in two days we would be able to shoot at least one hour of film but we had to repeat many scenes up to ten times and thus although an hour of film was shot, it was only 15 minutes long after editing – for which we had professional assistance. Nevertheless we were not disappointed but rather more than happy that we could now present our first self-made film. These two days, in reality it was almost two months if you count the preparation time as well, were a lot of effort for all of us but it was also great fun and a great experience that taught us a lot.

Development of a Scene: NO DRUGS – NO PROBS The Deal in the Smoking Room

On most of the scenes we fiddled around for a long time and because of that we had to shoot many of them again and again: once with the camera from left, once from above, once from the ego perspective and then again from the right.

At the beginning we wanted to make the scene relatively short because for us other scenes seemed to be more important. We decided that the two actors should be standing in front of the window, that we had enough light but we didn't know that we would get stage lights anyway. There they were supposed to make a quick deal and then disappear again. Right from the beginning it was clear to us that we wanted to show the exchanging hands in close up.

With the first rehearsals we made the scene a little longer to make room for other possible activities. Because we didn't have our director for the first two screen tests we couldn't make any important decisions, but we now got a number of suggestions for improvements; for example, we added a short scene where the addict mugs the dealer and takes his money back.

During the second screen test of the scene in the "smoking room" we didn't change our plans a lot because the director liked the ideas we had introduced at the first screen test, including the idea with the robbery. During the second screen test we tried to depict a drug-induced delirium and I must say that considering the fact that we had no idea about what we were doing, we succeeded really well.

Finally during the actual shooting on Thursday 11.3 and Friday 12.3 we had professional support from Carina who really helped us a lot. She had the idea to extend the deal scene a little and to concentrate it on two benches. With the lights we were able to bring out the graffiti in the background much better. We added more details which Carina was of the opinion were important. And we agreed with her.

In the end we had included everybody's ideas and every one was happy with the result.

Fabian Kahr

A selection of the feedback from the pupils after completion of the project is also illuminating:

What use was the one-minute test film "The Way to School – Caught Cheating"?

It was fun and I could already imagine how interesting and how much effort it would be too.

I learned how to act and that one has to speak clearly.

It gave us a lot.

A lot, because our film was based on the 1 minute film. It showed us that sound is very important.

Perhaps a foretaste of the real film.

We knew immediately how the camera worked on the first day of shooting.

An exercise before the real film.

Quite a lot because you are already familiar with the camera.

That was also very important because you could familiarise yourself with the camera and get used to it.

In fact we had already talked about everything in the screenplay in the group.

That will be the theme of our film. It was a test for us.

Developing ideas/realization

It was a little foretaste of the real film and one discovered mistakes in the one-minute film that one could correct.

Experience with camera positions.

It made camera handling more immediate.

During it we got completely new and interesting ideas for filmic realization.

It was helpful because it was a good test and gave the first impressions of film shooting.

Not a lot because our camera was broken and we couldn't look at the films.

It showed me the difficulties of making a film because even a film as short as this last a long time.

What value did the screenplay discussions have for you?

It was very valuable because we talked through all the shots and camera positions.
It gave us a lot because she explained to us how to do things and what we could do differently.
Not so much. It didn't contribute to the film a lot.
We knew exactly how our film was supposed to look, so it was not so critical.
It was pretty senseless because she thought it was not feasible to make the film.
It was helpful.
It was helpful, but it would have worked without it.
It was very helpful for us.
Small unsolved problems were solved.
Not much, really.
She showed us what was feasible and what not.
She told us a lot but we knew most of it anyway.
Very interesting. I drew the storyboard during the discussion.
Experiences, tips.
It was very valuable because we discussed all the shots and camera positions.
A great help because she drew our attention to mistakes in scenes that we just didn't see.
It was helpful but the film could have been made without her.
It was very useful because we went through all the scenes again. And she gave us a lot of tips.
Nothing really, because she only listed mistakes we already knew about.

For me the organisational and preparatory phase was ...

Stressful because I was responsible for all the locations.
Strenuous because we needed so many permits for the locations.
Very amusing. We had to re-write the screenplay very often, so it would have been pretty difficult without any time to prepare.
Important.
Strenuous. And in the end we didn't get permission to shoot in the provincial psychiatric clinic.
Unimportant because we did all that on the first day of shooting.
Not strenuous because I didn't have to do anything.
Not so strenuous really.
Strenuous at times. But it was also fun.
Very helpful and it helped a lot when acting.
Simple.
No problem. Had everything at home
Strenuous but necessary nevertheless.
Interesting.
...very important because before I didn't know to handle the camera, for example. Or I learned how difficult it is to make a film.
Hectic and bound up with a lot of stress.

For me the rehearsals and screen tests were ...

Amusing and interesting – on the other hand I then knew how strenuous shooting a film could be.
Strenuous, because we had to shoot so many scene again and again.
We didn't have any.
It made a lot of sense by pointing out potential problems.
Helpful.
Strenuous at times but also very funny.
Very interesting, really.
It was a very important part because we could try out the scenes for the film.
Then one knew what could be done differently.
Very strenuous.
Irritating.
Fun, because there were a lot of "mis-takes".
Strenuous.
Not so important because my group never made any screen tests.

Helpful and they revealed a few problems.
The week before the film.

Why did you choose the theme of your film?

Because Markl put the idea forward and everyone agreed.
Because not all of us are good in Latin.
It just came to us.
Because we thought it would look good.
No idea.
We wanted to make a funny film.
Every single one of us wanted to shoot a murder film.
Because the theme just came to me.
Because so many young people smoke dope and so on...
We wanted to make fun of a film and Superman fitted the bill.
We chose the theme because we didn't want to make something like the others.
I don't know exactly, but I think that a detective story is exciting.
Because it came to us during a chemistry lesson.
Because it is a very serious theme and we wanted to make people aware that drugs are not playthings.
We'll only see that when we've seen the film.
Because we thought it would be good and we wanted it to be funny.
Because it's the coolest.
It was the only idea that was realizable.
Originally we planned another film but it was too complicated.
Because it should be funny, which I hope it is.
I saw that other groups were making a drug film and our idea just came to me then.

How well did you manage to convert your idea into film language?

Very well.
Well. I imagined it a little different.
I think we succeeded well.
Quite well.
Very well because Michael knew some locations and had some of the scenes in his head.
I think quite well, but we'll only see when the film is finished.
Quite well.
Well, really.
Very well.
The realization was quite easy because we had a good advisor and advisor.
I still have some doubts about a few things.
Quite well, really because we visualised it very precisely.
Quite well, really. There are almost no deviations from the screenplay.
There are parts which could have been better, but I think that on the whole we succeeded.
Exactly as we imagined.
Very well.
Well, I think/hope.
Very well.
Well.
Well, I hope.
Actually we intended to make a film about smoking. But during the shooting it became clear to us that we had started on something boring. That's why we make an anti-smoking film.

How helpful was the storyboard in the preparation of the film / the shooting?

I drew the storyboard myself and it was no help at all.
It was pretty much the most important thing because every time we didn't know what to do we only had to look at the story board and then we could carry on immediately.
I think we would have been able to do it without one.

Not helpful in the least because we did not know how a dormitory in a boarding school looked and anyway I knew the shots by heart.

We didn't have one.

Very helpful.

Not really necessary, but probably useful when editing.

It wasn't helpful because our storyboard draughtsman only made a very rough one.

Great advantage to have one.

Very useful.

Absolute necessity because we shot the scenes according to it.

Not at all.

We didn't use it during shooting.

Not so useful, we knew how we were going to do it anyway.

The storyboard didn't help me a lot.

A lot e.g. the various shots, how you feel in front of the camera as an actor etc.

Wasn't important. We had our film in our heads.

Unimportant, we could have done it without it.

Very useful e.g. with difficult camera positions.

Not at all.

Very important because you have every scene in front of you in picture form.

We never used the storyboard during shooting. But it was useful during preparation.

What was your experience of the shooting?

That it is not always easy to remain serious. It was also strenuous at times.

That you have to shoot a scene not once, but five or six times.

That it can be strenuous; that you have to pay attention to every detail.

That you need a lot of patience and stamina.

Shot many scenes often. That it doesn't depend on what you want to play but on what you can do well.

Shot many scenes often.

That making a film certainly isn't as easy as it looks at first glance.

A Hollywood film is very often strenuous; on a small scale as well as large.

That you have to shoot everything many times.

That it isn't easy to get all the camera angles right.

Only good, really.

That you can shoot good scenes with good tricks.

Very good except for a few small differences of opinion.

To be precise.

We had to shoot all the scenes umpteen time. Strenuous.

That it is very strenuous.

Good experience.

That film making is very time intensive.

That it is very strenuous to shoot a film.

Cigarettes taste horrible, it is damned hard to make a film, it takes a lot of effort to make a film.

The group work in the team was ...

Very harmonious and good.

Very good.

Very good and we got along well.

Fun.

It was difficult at times because at the start there were often disagreements.

Not good.

Riddled with conflicts. But it was a good experience.

Very good.

Chaotic at the screen tests and rehearsals but the shoot went well generally speaking.

Very effective.

Very good.

Very harmonious and good.
Very good.
Fun.
Catastrophic because we fought a lot.
Good.
A lot of fun, we enjoyed ourselves a lot.

How do you assess the work with you advisor during the shooting?

Our advisor was very important because she gave us a lot of tips.
Very good, she helped us a lot and we understood each other.
I found it good that she was there because she knew substantially more than we did.
Really did help us and did a good job.
He was nice.
He was very helpful and, above all, took care of mobility.
It is certainly good to have an advisor because he can help setting up the camera.
It was a good joint effort.
He helped to substantially improve scenes and contributed new ideas.
Without an advisor we would not have been able to shoot a single scene as well as we did.
Our advisor helped us a lot and he was very nice.
Our advisor gave us many tips and we worked together with her very well.
Very helpful.
She was very important because we learned a lot more.
Very nice advisors. They helped us a great deal.
It was very useful.
Very.
Very good; without him we would have been fighting the whole time.
A very great share of the realization of the film because, amongst other things, we got some tips which certainly improved the film.
We had Mr. Richter as advisor. He was very patient and without him the film would not have become what it is now.
Helpful because the advisor knew a lot.

What are you proud of?

My performance as an actor.
That I was the only actor.
I'll only be proud when the film is finished and people like it.
Of the film.
That we had enough time to shoot the film.
Of the screenplay; of the story.
Of the film.
Of our film.
That we managed to do everything within the time planned.
Of the film and the snapshots.
I don't know.
Of the leap we made.
That we have good shots.
Of the editing and shooting.
Of the whole film.
Of my scene.
Of our entire film.
Of Markl, his screenplay.
Of the fact that we managed to make the film.

How has your opinion of film as a theme changed because of the project?

I know now that it really isn't so easy to make a decent film.

Actually not much has changed.

Now I know how long it takes to make a film.

Not very much.

I always had a positive opinion of film.

Being able to wait for a long time. Frequent repetitions of a scene.

I now have experience of how much time is necessary to shoot one hour of film.

I found it fun to make a film even if it is a lot of work.

Waiting a lot, frequently repeating a scene.

It is difficult to make a film.

I thought that it would be a lot of fun to make a film, but it is stressful and strenuous.

A lot of effort.

It has remained the same, really.

Actually rather good.

I look at films in the cinema differently now.

A lot of work.

It is very strenuous to make a film.

That being an actor is strenuous work.

A film is not a finished product that just flickers on the screen but a big, difficult project.

I became aware of what an effort it is to make a film.

I noticed how difficult it is to make a film.

That shooting a film is not as easy as it looks.

The aim of this project was also to develop a model as an example of how it is possible to achieve good results with less effort.

It seems to me that the following variations would be realizable:

1. One minute film on a theme (without advisor)
(e.g. the way to school, caught cheating)
1st hour preparation
2nd hour discussion of results
2. Intensive and long-term development of the theme
One minute film
Set theme
Chosen theme
Interdisciplinary cooperation re content
Storyboard / screenplay
3. Film analysis
4. One-minute film with advisor (self-selected theme)
5. Editing
For every art ed. class one group or 3 periods with an advisor.
Each group with its own work station.

The experience with the two most recent video projects has given impetus to offer film as a compulsory choice subject for school year 2004/5

Pupils from a previous 4th year class will then engage with the subject more intensively in the 6th.

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