***Everything’s Coming Together as Everything’s Falling Apart*: *Radical Hope for Filmmaking Educators***

Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon (speaker) & Chris Nunn (co-writer)

BAFTSS Conference April, 2024

* This paper is positioned as an extension of Andrew Vallance’s discussion on this panel and helps me frame this project of *Radical Hope for Filmmaking* *Educators*, which is a joint venture with myself and Chris Nunn.
* Andrew’s concerns resonate profoundly with our ongoing engagement when it comes to the pedagogical challenges inherent in designing and teaching film and television production within academia.
* As we navigate the complexities of our current educational paradigm, we confront fundamental questions regarding the nature and efficacy of our teaching practices.
* Questioning our objectives and contemplating how best to articulate our mission within the constraints of a flawed neo-liberal system.
* The aim, therefore, for this paper is to present some thoughts, perhaps present some provocations, but most importantly show solidarity with other colleagues.
* This Radical Hope project emerges out of the very real challenges we are facing but feels ever more urgent as we see more and more redundancies in our sector, particularly within Arts and Humanities, as universities are unable to balance their books.
* There are evermore pressures baring down on us from senior leadership who seemed to operate in a bubble and pander to Government policy shifts.
* However, the drive for more ‘bums on seats’ is very real and, even when production degrees are pulling in good numbers, the pressure to hit all the stats including unrealistic employability targets, is immense.
* This incessant drive to produce ‘industry-ready’ graduates or fill specific ‘industry gaps’ is ill conceived and not practical within a three-year generic production degree.
* The only way we can take back some control is to focus on what we candeliver within the means of our institutions.
* And we need to band together across institutions and help one another like never before.
* We need to take a moment to reflect on what this education is achieving within the context of an industry that has a well-publicised problem with sexism, does not have a solid track record when it comes to diversity and inclusion, and not to mention workers’ rights.
* Ironically, the strikes and the production slowdown have exposed what many film practice educators have known all along – that work is precarious, sometimes difficult to get, and that there are often gaps in that work.
* In this context, a film production education has a moral responsibility to ensure that it remains broad, and not specialist skills-based for jobs that may be there in boom times but gone a short time later.
* In fact, in Feb of this year Sky news proclaimed, ‘*No pension, no career, no future’: Grim reality behind the scenes of British TV and film industry*.’
* (LINK: ttps://news.sky.com/story/no-pension-no-career-no-future-grim-reality-behind-the-scenes-of-british-tv-and-film-industry-13073162)
* This report was commissioned by Sky News and conducted by BECTU (LINK: https://members.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/library/3182).
* As the headline suggests it paints a bleak picture for ‘ordinary workers’ and BECTU are calling for Government intervention for this growing crisis within the industry.
* Out of 4,000 workers polled, 68% of respondents were currently not working.
* 30% had no work at all in the past three months.
* BAME respondents were less likely to have worked at all over the past three months as opposed to their white counterparts.
* And 88% are concerned about their financial security over the next six months.
* Finally, this next stat shows a worrying trend, 75% of respondents in the study say they are struggling with their mental health, with the impact of this crisis hitting young workers hardest.
* 90% of 18-24sstating that they are struggling with their mental welling being.
* The Head of BECTU, Philippa Childs, said, “far too many workers – particularly women and those from the global majority – told us they intend to leave the industry altogether within five years”.
* This report (along with other indicators) demonstrates the precarious nature of working within the UK film and television industry and should make us question what our remit is when we come in front of students.
* Should we be constantly pandering to an unrealistic employability agenda or creating space for students to explore, debate, and learn within the wider landscape of film and media?
* There are limitless possibilities for those skilled in audio-visual practice.
* A question for myself and Chris has been, how can we **work together** as teams of educators to deliver a more holistic approach to filmmaking education.
* As bell hooks wrote, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibilities in the academy”.
* Whilst re-designing numerous undergraduate production degree programmes, including at Greenwich, Chris and I shared the same concerns: how do we make this practical degree education meaningful and useful to the students without compromising the basic tenets of a university degree.
* When I look at my own educational journey as a working-class mature student, I had no idea what a university degree had to offer.
* My initial goal, having worked for the BBC, was to gain a degree to get onto the BBC Producers trainee scheme.
* University for me was transactional; I saw no other way of going up the career ladder.
* However, what I encountered was so much more than I had bargained for, and that BBC trainee scheme was left far behind.
* I had found my way to something much more than I could have imagined.
* In fact, I never left the academy, and I continue to find ways in which to articulate my practice within an academic framework so that I can evidence the intellectual work that goes on when making a film.
* Having led on re-shaping numerous practical degrees programmes, the struggles have changed significantly.
* Back when I was at York St John, the discussions were around how much theory to how much practice should be on a programme, and how an integrated approach could be appreciated by students, but would it deliver on all that we needed to cover.
* Now market-forces bare down on us threatening an holistic approach to film practice education.
* Even back in 2012, Petrie, warned that putting market-oriented imperatives first rather than cultural value or social good was short sighted. ('Creative Industries and Skills: Film Education and Training in the Era of New Labour', 2012: p.357)
* And this has become so real for me personally in recent weeks as I leave esteemed colleagues in film and media under threat at the University of Portsmouth.
* The pressure, particularly for post 92 Uni’s, to deliver on the stats ­– NSS and employability targets, the struggle becomes trying to reattain the core tenets of what it is to come to university and explore a topic, enabling students to build confidence and an independence to find their own career path.
* In sectioning off the production side to Film and Media teaching into its own degree programme the promise of the career job of your choice within film and TV seems to follow, and we would all agree, this is a tricky asks.
* Disillusioned students who feel they were sold a ‘pup’ are a reality.
* There is evidence and some interesting findings about what graduates think about their practice-orientated in film and TV degree programmes, see Percival, 2023 and Wallis et all (2021) just for starters.
* So, the questions this paper seeks to ask, in this specific context are: 1. What are the alternatives? and 2. how might we go about encouraging a more radicalagenda through our pedagogic practice?
* It could seem hopeless, just our sectors predicament of late, as we heard loud and clear from in the Keynote yesterday, but there could be some possibilities, some ways to navigate this current climate that are important to imagine (or better still, to enact!)
* One of those is the notion of ‘radical hope’.
* For Bloch (1996), as for our purposes here, art is a condition hope. Conversely, hope is also a condition of (making) art (*The Principle of Hope Vol. 1,* 1996).
* What we do in Arts and Humanities does matter, even though this Government would have us believe otherwise.
* “Be Bold. Be Rebellious. Choose art. It Matters.” Neil Gaiman states in this illustrated little book, “Art matters because Your Imagination can change the world!” (2015).
* Bloch goes on to suggest that ‘it is a question here of the psychological process of approaching, which are so characteristic above all for youth, for times of change, [and] for the adventures of productivity.’
	+ (*The Principle of Hope Vol. 1,* 1996: 12)
* Radical hope, for us at least is not an idealistic notion, it presents us with a *method –* for approaching work**,** particularly with young people, who are beset by a range of (totally understandable) anxieties.
* This is not about alternatives for the sake of alternatives; these are urgent questions in the context of the precarious situation that we find ourselves in.
* Feminist philosopher Soper makes the salient point that capitalist work ethic(s) structures our lives, and it takes up too much of our time (*For an Alternative Hedonism*, 2023).
* In a conversation with Feminist activist and academic, Segal she notes that, "we need a shift to working less so that it is not so central to our lives".
* For us, what Segal and Soper highlight, is that our whole notion of what education should achieve needs to shift, so it is not all about a career, but about preparing us for having fulfilling lives.
	+ (Segal and Soper, *Reconsidering The Good Life,* online talk: 2022,  <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/reconsidering-the-good>)
* We believe as does Gannon, ‘Radical hope has to be more than a slogan; it has to be the set of lenses through which we see our pedagogy, our students, and our institutions’
	+ (*Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto,* 2020: 6).
* There needs to be something tangible, which leads to action.
* In a more general sense, Watters states that, 'Education is about what we learn today so we can be better tomorrow. Education is a practice of hope. You cannot be indifferent about the future and be an educator’ (*Hope for the Future,* 2022: online).
* So, if this is the case then we are already moving in the right direction.
* Even though you could dismiss this thinking as utopian, it is something that can be enacted upon today, as Segal states, 'So utopian thinking is about creating community, it's about sharing, it's about not seeing ourselves as those isolated individuals who every minute should be simply trying to improve ourselves, rather than working for each other to try and improve the conditions for everyone.' (quoted from the online talk but discussed at length in book *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy*, 2017)
	+ (Segal, *Reconsidering The Good Life,* online: 2022,  <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/reconsidering-the-good>)
* Isn’t that what we have been doing at this conference.
* We believe this collective approach can work in general or on a university degree course, with tutors and students.
* For Fisher, in his Postcapitalist Desire work, he suggested that ‘All you need is the members of the group together, and when they talk together, honestly and openly, they’ll start to see they have common problems and common interests, and also the cause of those problems is not them but something else.’  (Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire*, 2020: p.115)
* Turning this to the student - if we ignore the anxieties and pressures on the human beings taking our courses and the realities of the film and TV industry, then we are not confronting the crisis that is before us.
* If as Hjort claims that ‘the priorities and philosophies of institutions devoted to practice-oriented film education has a decisive impact on filmmakers’ creative outlooks, working practices, and networks, shaping not only the stylistic (visual and narrative) regularities that define distinctive bodies of cinematic work but the dynamics of a given film industry’ (2013: p.34).
* We could be part of a project that collectively seeks answers to all these seemingly overwhelming issues.
* What we pose here then, is to consider what impact such radical hope might encourage for ourselves as educators, and more importantly for our students.
* The ways in which we do our work in higher education spaces, is *genuinely*shaping the future of art, design, our creative industries and cultures.
* As I finish up: The title of this paper *Everything’s Coming Together as Everything’s Falling Apart* points to Rebecca’s Solnit’s 2014 book *Hope in the Dark*: (originally published in 2005).
* In this updated version Solnit continues to engage with notions of hope and activism.
* She writes, “I believe that you can talk about both the terrible things we should engage with and the losses behind us, as well as the wins and achievements that give us the confidence to endeavour to keep pursuing the possibilities.” (p 142)
* If we look at filmmaking education alone there are many different struggles, many issues and concerns, and my hope, indeed Chris’s hope as well, is that we can work together in actively solving problems, so the future is less desperate.
* We cannot underestimate how powerful this is for young people in particular who are trying to make sense of the world and their place in it.
* Neither of us believe we have answers for specific students, but we do believe we can highlight some specific problems within a wider context, whilst at the same time deliver both critically evaluative and craft based skilled to help students reach their goals, as well as possibly reassess them.
* For us, who have the means to teach filmmaking, together with students, we have the potential to not only find ways to make our collective lives better, but a way to communicate solutions, celebrate triumphs, and publicise action.
* Young people as well as old, need to feel that they are actively doing something to make our futures better.
* However, action needs momentum, Solnit states that if you believe that, “… the world is totally doomed no matter what, little or nothing is demanded of you in response.”
* Despair takes over, the alternative is hope, but in this context, it requires action.
* Filmmaking, which has a long tradition of activism, could be a way to collectively take back the struggle for our future.
* As Gannon states, “Radical hope eschews despair, but does so in a way that often relies upon the faith that our current thinking and actions will create a better future­–even without specifically understanding what that future will look like” (Gannon, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto,* 2020).