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Is a Cinema Studies Degree the New M.B.A.?

By ELIZABETH VAN NESS

RICK HERBST, now attending Yale Law School, may yet turn out to be the current decade's archetypal film major. Twenty-three years old, he graduated last year from the University of Notre Dame, where he studied filmmaking with no intention of becoming a filmmaker. Rather, he saw his major as a way to learn about power structures and how individuals influence each other.

"People endowed with social power and prestige are able to use film and media images to reinforce their power - we need to look to film to grant power to those who are marginalized or currently not represented," said Mr. Herbst, who envisions a future in the public policy arena. The communal nature of film, he said, has a distinct power to affect large groups, and he expects to use his cinematic skills to do exactly that.

At a time when street gangs warn informers with DVD productions about the fate of "snitches" and both terrorists and their adversaries routinely communicate in elaborately staged videos, it is not altogether surprising that film school - promoted as a shot at an entertainment industry job - is beginning to attract those who believe that cinema isn't so much a profession as the professional language of the future.

Some 600 colleges and universities in the United States offer programs in film studies or related subjects, a number that has grown steadily over the years, even while professional employment opportunities in the film business remain minuscule. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are only about 15,050 jobs for film producers or directors, which means just a few hundred openings, at best, each year.

Given the gap between aspiration and opportunity, film education has often turned out to be little more than an expensive detour on the road to doing something else. Thus, Aaron Bell, who graduated as a film major from the University of Wisconsin in 1988, struggled through years of uninspiring nonunion work managing crews on commercials, television pilots and the occasional feature before landing his noncinematic job designing advertising for Modern Luxury Media LLC, a Chicago-based magazine publisher.

"You sort of have this illusion coming out of film school that you'll work into this small circle of creatives, but you're actually more pigeonholed as a technician," said Mr. Bell, who is now 39.

For some next-generation students, however, the shot at a Hollywood job is no longer the goal. They'd rather make cinematic technique - newly democratized by digital equipment that reduces the cost of a picture to a few thousand dollars and renders the very word "film" an anachronism - the bedrock of careers as far afield as law and the military.

At the University of Southern California, whose School of Cinema-Television is the nation's oldest film school (established in 1929), fully half of the university's 16,500 undergraduate students take at least one cinema/television class. That is possible because Elizabeth Daley, the school's dean, opened its classes to the university at large in 1998, in keeping with a new philosophy that says, in effect, filmic skills are too valuable to be confined to movie world professionals. "The greatest digital divide is between those who can read and write with media, and those who can't," Ms. Daley said. "Our core knowledge needs to belong to everybody."

In fact, even some who first enrolled in U.S.C.'s film school to take advantage of its widely acknowledged position as a prime portal to Hollywood have begun to view their cinematic skills as a new form of literacy. One such is David Hendrie, who came to U.S.C. in 1996 after a stint in the military intending to become a filmmaker, but - even after having had the producer/director Robert Zemeckis as a mentor - found himself drawn to the school's Institute for Creative Technologies, where he creates military training applications in a variety of virtual reality, gaming and filmic formats. One film he developed was privately screened for the directors John Milius and Steven Spielberg, who wanted to understand the military's vision of the future.

"That was like a film student's dream," said Mr. Hendrie, who nonetheless believes he has already outgrown anything he was likely to accomplish on the studio circuit. "I found myself increasingly demoralized by my experiences trying to pitch myself as a director for films like 'Dude, Where's My Car?'" Mr. Hendrie said. "What I'm doing here at I.C.T. speaks to the other interests I've always had, and in the end excited my passion more."

In recent weeks, members of a Baltimore street gang circulated a DVD that warned against betrayal, packaged in a cover that appeared to show three dead bodies. That and the series of gruesome execution videos that have surfaced in the Middle East are perhaps only the most extreme face of a complex sort of post-literacy in which cinematic visuals and filmic narrative have become commonplace.

Melding easily with the growing digital folk culture, some film majors have simply taken to creating art forms outside the boundaries of the established film business. In one such instance, Wes Pentz, a.k.a. DJ Diplo - a 2003 graduate of Temple University, where film majors are encouraged to invent new career paths in museums, leisure businesses and elsewhere - broke through with his trademark Hollertronix, a style modeled on cinematic soundtracks. "I think of my songs as having a movement, like I would watch in a film, and there's a narrative feel to them," said Mr. Pentz, who said he had learned to frame music differently because of his film school experience.

In the public policy arena, meanwhile, students like Yale's Mr. Herbst hope to heighten political debate with productions far more pointed than the most political feature film. Even a picture like "Hotel Rwanda," with its unblinking look at African genocide, is "a soup kitchen approach," Mr. Herbst said: "You're offered something to eat, but there are no vitamins." Bringing film directly into politics, he expects to throw objectivity out the window and change minds - perhaps not an unrealistic aim at a time when, in a bit of

what a headline in The Wall Street Journal characterized as "film noir," the Edward D. Jones & Company brokerage has entered the fray over the proposed Social Security overhaul with a highly produced video.

To some extent, such broadening vision is already helping to make economic sense of film education, which in the past was often a long path to nowhere. "Most find their way, and the skills they learn from us are applicable to other careers and pursuits," Dale Pollock, dean of the School of Filmmaking at the North Carolina School of the Arts, said of his students. "So we're not wasting their time or money."

Still more, Ms. Daley, the U.S.C. Cinema-Television dean, argues that to generalize such skills has become integral to the film school's mission. More than 60 academic courses at U.S.C. now require students to create term papers and projects that use video, sound and Internet components - and for Ms. Daley, it's not enough. "If I had my way, our multimedia literacy honors program would be required of every student in the university," she said.