

REDESIGNING UNDERGRADUATE DIRECTING CURRICULA BEYOND THE AUTEUR MODEL

ROBERTO FRANCO MOREIRA

Departamento de Cinema, Rádio e Televisão

Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo

Roberto Moreira is an associate professor of filmmaking and screenwriting at the University of São Paulo and an award-winning Brazilian director. He has directed the features *Up Against Them All*, *Paulista* and *Fear Therapy*, and TV series for Rede Globo, TV Cultura (Emmy Kids winner *Pedro & Bianca*) and Fox. He has held leading roles in cultural policy bodies and industry organizations, including SIAESP, FSA and Brazil's National Film Council.

Corresponding author

Roberto Franco Moreira
robertom@usp.br

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Abstract

This article reports on the redesign of a curriculum in the undergraduate directing course of the Audiovisual Studies Program at the University of São Paulo (USP). Drawing on theories of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and productive constraint (Haught-Tromp, 2017), it argues that project-based film pedagogy – inherited from the auteur tradition of the 1960s – is misaligned with the developmental needs of students between eighteen and twenty-three years old. The text documents how the previous model, organised around a sequence of increasingly ambitious personal short films, produced authorship conflicts, recurring technical errors, and superficial feedback. It then describes the intervention that replaced those projects with structured scene exercises using *The Book of Sides II* (Kost, 2017), designed to increase the density of learning through constraint, repetition, and immediate feedback. The account is based on practitioner observations over several iterations of the course. Future work should incorporate systematic assessment data. The article concludes by discussing the implications for film education, including the potential role of artificial intelligence as a tool for multiplying cycles of practice and feedback within this pedagogical framework.

Keywords: *Film education; Undergraduate curriculum; Constraint-based pedagogy; Emerging adulthood; Artificial intelligence; Film directing*

The Crisis: Project-Based Pedagogy and Its Limits

This text discusses undergraduate education, which is the learning process of students between eighteen and twenty-three years old. The central problem is straightforward. Several film schools still organise their directing curricula around a sequence of increasingly ambitious personal projects, which is a model inherited from the auteur tradition of the 1960s. This article argues that such a model is pedagogically misaligned with the developmental stage of undergraduate students and describes an alternative based on structured, constraint-based exercises.

European film schools passed through three phases that shaped this inheritance (Petrie & Stoneman, 2014). Up until the mid-1950s, these schools had a pragmatic mission: to rebuild a film industry destroyed by war. They trained technical professionals to restart production. With the rise of auteur cinema in the 1960s, their orientation shifted. The goal was no longer to serve an industry but to develop filmmakers capable of expressing personal visions. This approach has been predominant: “as film education grew through the 20th century, it was for the most part conceptualised and delivered around the model of “director as auteur” (Sheridan et al., 2016, p. 217).

Our school at USP was created in this context. In the 1980s, another change occurred in schools: the revaluation of the screenwriter, the producer, and the collaborative nature of filmmaking. Attention returned to processes and teamwork rather than individual authorship. It was within this third wave that we revised our curriculum and created the Audiovisual Studies Program. For the first time, we hired professors of screenwriting and production, expanded the practical exercises, and embraced the idea of understanding cinema within the broader field of audiovisual culture. Yet, in one essential aspect, we remained tied to the 1960s: the curriculum was still organised around a sequence of increasingly ambitious

personal projects, what we once described as a “spiral of complexity.” This history matters because it explains a structural inheritance where the auteur model became the default pedagogy, not because of evidence that it worked but because of institutional inertia. The context changed and our methods should change too (Maylett, 2019). What follows documents how that model can be problematic and how to replace it.

What Failed: The Mini-film Model

When I first took over the directing course in the second semester, the model revealed its limitations clearly. The main activity was the traditional “rotation of roles,” where each student performed a different function on set. But behind this apparently neutral exercise was the hidden ambition to make short films that were treated as personal works.

We, the faculty, provided the conditions for that: one day of shooting per project, eighteen shooting days in total. With delays and rescheduling, the process occupied a month, followed by weeks of editing and, only the next semester was sound finishing. The result resembled feature-film logistics but without money, without experience, and with students still learning to operate the equipment.

The well-intentioned rule that forbade the screenwriter from directing produced frustration. The writer would deliver a weak script, the director would rewrite it poorly, and both would end up dissatisfied. Coherence was lost along with friendships. Directors began to treat the exercise as their film, and when conflicts arose, they were left alone with what felt like personal failure.

These mini-films were often submitted to festivals, feeding unrealistic expectations. The discussion of student projects, which might appear constructive, in fact fostered competitiveness and inflated egos. We even had an

authorship dispute that reached the courts because of one of these exercises.

Professors were pushed into the role of consultants for students' projects rather than teachers responsible for designing structured learning paths. End-of-semester evaluations exposed the contradiction: eighteen films needing to be screened, little time for analysis, and superficial feedback. Students left without understanding their mistakes or how to improve. The same basic problems of *découpage*, blocking, and continuity kept recurring, even in final projects. The model was unsustainable. It demanded artistic mastery from students who were still learning the elementary grammar of filmmaking.

Student reports collected between 2017 and 2019, before the curriculum redesign, corroborate this account. The testimonies below, drawn from end-of-semester evaluations, illustrate recurring patterns across multiple cohorts.

Overambitious planning and recurring *découpage* failures were near-universal. One student reported: "We proposed far more shots than we were capable of. [...] Our mistake was not accounting for the crew's inexperience, which caused exorbitant preparation times." Another noted: "Already on the first day we saw it was impossible and reduced the *découpage* for the following days." A third described the cascading consequences: "The *découpage* had been synthesised crudely and inefficiently due to delays and the initial rush. On the second day, more than half the planned shots were dropped."

Role confusion was equally pervasive. Students consistently reported uncertainty about basic functions, particularly that of assistant director: "I still felt insecure about the role, since I had no confidence about the actual functions of an AD. This feeling was shared by many members of the crew." In the rotation-of-roles model, departments frequently bypassed the established chain of responsibility: "I felt disrespected much of the time, since the impression was that the assistant

director only served to 'call' sound and camera, and to prepare call sheets."

The conflation of exercise and personal work produced emotional distress. One student wrote: "I was tormented by the possibility of failure — or, more than that, by what that failure would represent about my own abilities. [...] All that pressure ended up making me experiment much less than I would have liked." The fear of error inhibited the learning process that the exercises were supposed to foster.

Conflicts between crew members were structural, not incidental. A producer reported: "The producer, amid a university crew that prioritises artistic creation, is seen as a paranoid being who does not fully believe in the team. A castrator of everyone's creative identity. [...] The producer is ignored and conveniently should not be taken into account." Directors and writers clashed over scripts they did not choose: "I was not at all satisfied with having to direct this script, since neither I nor my partner liked it." Two female directors described being systematically undermined: "They overrode our decisions as directors, whether about *découpage* or post-production, and silenced our wishes, ignoring us in discussions and meetings."

A former student, reflecting on the course as a whole, captured the systemic nature of these problems: "There is too much drama, classes split over issues that need not exist, and instead of leaving for the job market with a support network, we leave with some enemies. [...] The rotation exercise is a relay race. Everything could be simpler." The same student identified the equity dimension: "We need to think about lower-income students entering the program. [...] The plurality of voices we want to see in [Brazilian] audiovisual also depends on our program's permeability to people of other social classes."

These testimonies are not systematic data. They are unstructured reports written as part of the course requirements, not

collected through validated instruments or according to research protocols. Their value lies in the consistency of the patterns they reveal across the cohorts: the same problems — overplanning, role confusion, interpersonal conflict, emotional distress, and the exclusion of less-prepared students — recurred with striking regularity, suggesting structural rather than individual causes.

The failures were not accidental. They were the structural consequences of a pedagogical model that treated students as if they were already auteurs, asking them to demonstrate mastery before they had acquired even basic knowledge of the craft.

Theoretical Framework: Emerging Adulthood, Flow, and Productive Constraint

Three theoretical frameworks illuminate why the project-based model fails for undergraduates and why constraint-based exercises succeed.

The first concerns developmental stage. The logic of projects made sense for students of the 1960s, who entered the workforce quickly and established families early. Today's students inhabit what psychologist Jeffrey Arnett calls emerging adulthood, a stage roughly spanning eighteen to twenty-nine years, characterised by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a sense of transition, and optimism about the future (Arnett, 2000).

Students at this stage seek exploration rather than mastery. Their identities are fluid; they are still testing possibilities. In this context, large personal projects with high stakes and long timelines are pedagogically misaligned. They demand stability and confidence that belongs to a later stage of development. The result is often anxiety and discouragement rather than growth.

There is also a psychological dimension. Suicide rates are highest among those aged eighteen to twenty-four years old, with university students being the most vulnerable group. The first and last years of study, moments of transition, are particularly delicate (Teixeira, 2025). I mention this only to illustrate the emotional stakes of a pedagogy that equates success with personal worth.

For these reasons, undergraduate programs should focus on development rather than output. The learning environment must allow students to fail safely, receive immediate feedback, and progress incrementally.

The second framework explains the conditions under which such development occurs. Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) describes this balance: clear goals, matched challenge and ability, immediate feedback, and low penalties for errors. Long projects tend to violate these conditions, while short exercises make them possible. The project model typically presents challenges that exceed the students' current abilities, offers delayed and diffuse feedback, and imposes high symbolic costs for error — the precise inverse of flow conditions.

The third framework addresses the role of limitation itself. Constraints of time, space, resources, or form reduce the overwhelming number of possible choices to a manageable set and create the conditions for deeper exploration (Haught-Tromp, 2017). When the parameters are strict, students must think more carefully and inventively. Limitation becomes a productive pressure, and transforms necessity into focus. This principle, already present in the National Film School of Denmark and later in *Dogma 95*, as well as in experimental writing movements like Oulipo, proves especially effective in film education where, by the nature of the production process, limitations are a rule.

Together, these three frameworks (developmental stage, flow, and productive constraint) form the theoretical basis for the curriculum redesign described in the next section.

The Intervention: Redesigned Curriculum

The pandemic created an opportunity to rethink the curriculum's structure. I began by separating writing from directing. Instead of personal scripts, we started using short scenes from *The Book of Sides II* (Kost, 2017) — texts written specifically to teach directing.

The idea was straightforward: directing is not creation from nothing but the ability to read, interpret, communicate intentions to a team, and organise the process so that the form serves drama. The director's expression lies in images and sounds; the script is their material, not their identity.

We reduced the scale. Each exercise was filmed in half a day against a black background without sets or locations. Actors came from the School of Dramatic Arts and were assigned by order of registration, without auditions. There was no catering, no location logistics, and no art direction. The focus returned to essentials.

Rabiger (2007, 2017) demonstrated the effectiveness of dividing each assignment into manageable steps that make learning visible and repeatable. My approach builds upon his method. Another valuable reference was Preminger (2019), who proposes exercises that use the same dramatic material to emphasise the role of the director.

The exercise unfolded through four stages (dramatic analysis, rehearsal with actors, technical rehearsal without actors, and studio shooting), each followed by a discussion. The sequence allowed students to make mistakes, correct them, and try again. The shooting that had once halted the entire course for a month can now fit within a single week.

The design principles can be summarised as follows. First, constraint: fixed scene texts, black background, no art direction, assigned actors — eliminating variables so that students can concentrate on directing. Second, repetition: multiple short exercises rather than one long project, creating frequent cycles of practice and feedback. Third, horizontality: all students performed the same tasks under the same conditions, enabling direct comparison and shared vocabulary. Fourth, progressive complexity: each iteration of the course revealed new difficulties that informed the design of subsequent exercises.

Outcomes and Evidence

The learning became horizontal. All students practiced the same skills, used a shared vocabulary, and were evaluated using the same criteria. Conflicts disappeared. Proficiency in *découpage* and the direction of actors improved markedly, and the students felt both proud and confident.

The qualitative evidence presented in Section 2, specifically student testimonies collected between 2017 and 2019, provides a baseline against which these outcomes can be assessed, even in the absence of controlled measurement. Under the previous model, end-of-semester reports consistently documented overambitious *découpage*, role confusion, interpersonal conflict, emotional distress linked to personal investment in projects, and a sense of being "thrown to the lions." Under the redesigned model, none of these patterns recurred in comparable form. The elimination of personal scripts removed the emotional stakes that had fuelled authorship disputes. The standardised conditions — same scene text, same equipment, and same assessment criteria — eliminated the role confusion that students had described as pervasive. The four-stage structure, with a discussion after each stage, replaced the delayed and diffuse feedback of the project model with immediate, targeted correction.

These observations must be qualified. This account draws on practitioner observations and on unstructured student reports rather than systematic assessment instruments. No controlled comparison between the old and new models was conducted with matched cohorts. The claims above — reduced conflict, improved technical proficiency, and increased student confidence — reflect my judgment as an instructor, informed by years of end-of-semester discussions, the visible quality of student work, and the contrast between pre-reform and post-reform testimonies. They have not been measured using validated instruments.

The institutional course evaluations from the most recent iteration of the redesigned curriculum (second semester of 2025, 32 respondents out of 45 enrolled total) provide structured evidence that complements practitioner observations. Using a standardised Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” the students rated the course structure’s contribution to learning with a 97% agreement (77% strongly agree), while the balance between theory and practice was 94% (84% strongly agree), and the adequacy of the time allocated to the activities at 100% (75% strongly agree). No student expressed any degree of disagreement with these items. While these evaluations were not designed as a comparative instrument and do not measure the same cohort under both models, the pattern they reveal is telling. The structural complaints that dominated the pre-reform testimonies — insufficient time, a lack of feedback, and the disconnect between theory and practice — are entirely absent from the standardised responses.

Certain patterns were consistent and observable. Under the previous model, the same errors in *découpage*, blocking, and continuity recurred across the semesters, even through to the final projects. This suggests that the project-based format did not produce cumulative learning. The students themselves recognised this. One wrote, “It was an experience that did not allow much reflection on what we were doing; we

just did it without truly understanding why.” Under the new model, specific errors could be identified in early exercises and addressed in subsequent ones within the same semester because the exercise format allows for rapid iterations. Students who struggled with actor blocking in the first exercise showed visible improvement by the third, having received targeted feedback after each attempt.

Inclusion and Equity

When film schools organise around personal projects, they inevitably reproduce the logic of the market. There are pitches, selections, pre-production, filming, and post-production. Within this framework, each student’s trajectory becomes individual and competitive. Every opportunity is perceived as a test of talent, and failure is interpreted as personal inadequacy. The symbolic cost of error becomes too high.

This logic contradicts the idea of inclusion. The notion of a “student project” assumes that creativity is innate or the result of previous advantages. When we celebrate a “talented” student, we are admitting that the school has not corrected inequalities — it has only acknowledged them. Inclusive education must reduce the differences in prior experience and distribute opportunities for practice evenly.

Project selection, even when democratic, reinforces inequality: some direct while others serve. But all are learners and should have equal access to the same kinds of experiences. A more equitable structure is one in which everyone undertakes comparable exercises with clear objectives and a transparent approach to assessment.

A former student identified the material dimension of this exclusion: “We need to think about lower-income students entering the program. [...] There is a financial cost — I’ve heard of projects that cost two thousand reais [six hundred American dollars]— and a time cost for those who have to

work to support themselves. [...] A film program that does not think of itself as part of one of the most unequal societies in the world ends up contributing to that inequality."

The constraint-based model addresses this problem in three concrete ways. First, by eliminating the selection process, every student directs every exercise, thus removing the gatekeeping that concentrates opportunity. The second is by standardising the conditions: fixed scene texts, identical equipment, and assigned actors — variables that in the project model reward students with greater cultural capital or prior filmmaking experience. Third, by making the assessment criteria transparent and shared: all students are evaluated based on the same competencies (*découpage*, actor direction, and dramatic interpretation), so the feedback becomes diagnostic rather than judgmental. We are not talking about talent, but about the competences learned in the course. Students who arrive with less preparation receive the same number of practice cycles and the same quality of feedback as those who arrive with more. The structure does not guarantee equal outcomes but it does distribute the conditions for learning more evenly than a system organised around competitive project selection.

The Course as Method

The scene exercises were only a beginning. They offered a controlled environment that exposed how the students think and act when faced with basic directing problems.

But they also revealed the next challenge. While the students could block a scene and direct actors, many still did not know how to tell a story. They could film a situation but not construct a narrative. They struggled with transitions of time, space, and emotional state, with cross-cutting, and with how to build mystery, suspense, or surprise. Future exercises should focus precisely on these skills, strengthening the students' ability to move between scenes, to

manage point of view, and to build tension in a controlled, deliberate way.

A deeper question also emerged: how can a story be told that has meaning? Technical progress alone cannot answer this. To achieve meaning, students need to widen their horizons. They must learn not only to master form but to engage with the world. Our exercises also have to extend outward toward observation, research, and contact with reality, otherwise we will produce stylistic competence without relevance.

This movement outward cannot stop at production. Students must also learn to show their work, to circulate it, and to understand how images reach an audience. Exhibiting and distributing their exercises, even in small, local, or experimental contexts, trains them to think about reception, impact, and responsibility.

Only after all of these experiences will they face the challenge of personal expression within the boundaries of production limits.

This experience made clear that we need a progressive and adaptive curriculum. What we require is not a fixed sequence of exercises but a living process that evolves through feedback. Each iteration of the course produces new observations. When a specific difficulty recurs — for instance, inconsistency in tone or emotion — the next version of the course must respond with a new, targeted exercise.

In this model, every semester functions as an experiment in teaching. The instructor's role is not to repeat procedures but to refine them continuously, designing exercises that address the difficulties students actually reveal. The aim is to improve not only student learning but the method itself.

The teacher becomes a designer of the learning conditions. Teaching is an act of observation and adjustment. Each

group of students provides evidence of what works and what does not, and it is that evidence that shapes the next iteration. The process is empirical and cumulative. This iterative approach, in which each semester generates evidence that reshapes the next, follows what Schon (1983) calls reflective practice. This is where knowledge is constructed through cycles of action and observation rather than prior prescription.

In this context, the teaching of audiovisual theory and history remains fundamental. They provide the conceptual framework that allows us to understand what is being done and why, and to connect each exercise to a broader artistic and pedagogical tradition rather than treating it as an isolated event.

Implications: AI as a Multiplier of Practice

The pedagogical framework described above — constraint, repetition, feedback, iteration — creates a natural entry point for artificial intelligence. AI does not alter the logic of the curriculum, it accelerates it.

Artificial intelligence enters naturally into this framework, not as a creative substitute but as a multiplier of practice. For the first time, technologies exist that lower the cost and time of experimentation. Scenes can be simulated, rehearsed, and visualised quickly, enabling more frequent cycles of trial and feedback. The goal is not to produce more material but to increase the density of learning.

AI extends the feedback loop. It allows students to test variations, compare alternatives, and detect recurring errors. It helps teachers see where understanding breaks down and design new exercises accordingly. The gain is both quantitative and qualitative. More opportunities to practice mean more occasions to reflect.

Film schools have always depended on the technology that is available to determine how many cycles of practice students

can complete. Celluloid limited exercises to a handful per semester, digital video multiplied them, and AI-assisted tools now promise to compress the cycle further. This progression is not only technological but pedagogical as well: each reduction in time per iteration increases the density of learning. Yet as Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) note in their systematic review of 146 studies on AI in higher education, most of the research on these tools has been driven by computer science rather than by educators — a disparity that underscores the need for pedagogically grounded accounts of AI integration.

AI tools could serve at least two functions within the four-stage exercise model. First, in the dramatic analysis stage, large language models can help students generate and compare multiple interpretations of a scene text, exposing assumptions they might not otherwise examine. They can discuss and frame the AI interpretation as another point of view that can be contradicted. Second, in the technical rehearsal stage, AI-based previsualisation tools can simulate camera positions and blocking, allowing students to test *découpage* options before committing to a setup. For example, storyboarding is a painful process that can be made easier with AI.

In practical terms, Mollick and Mollick (2023) identified seven pedagogical roles that AI can take on in classrooms — tutor, coach, mentor, teammate, tool, simulator, and student — each with distinct benefits and risks. Within the constraint-based model described here, the most relevant roles are those of simulator (testing *découpage* alternatives before committing to a setup) and tool (dramatic analysis of a script). By contrast, the tutor role requires careful design to avoid replacing the productive struggle that constraint-based pedagogy deliberately creates.

This iterative model of teaching parallels how both human and artificial learning operate, which is through cycles of feedback and adaptation. Yet human learning involves interpretation, emotion, and intention. These remain the domain

of the teacher and student. AI can process data and generate options, but it cannot assign meaning or judge emotional truth. It lacks dramaturgical judgment, which is the capacity to assess whether a performance rings true, whether a cut serves the emotional arc, and whether an image carries the intended weight. This judgment, developed through practice and reflection, is what the exercises are designed to cultivate. Recognising this boundary is essential. It prevents us from treating AI as an autonomous agent and situates it as a tool within a pedagogical system that is guided by human judgment.

Used in this way, AI reinforces a basic principle: that learning arises from doing and reflecting, not from automation.

Collaborating with AI in the classroom must be designed so that the machine augments the student's learning process rather than acting as a substitute for the cognitive work that produces learning. The risk is that students use AI to bypass difficulties rather than engaging with it, which is precisely the opposite of what constraint-based pedagogy intends. The challenge for educators is to design AI integration that preserves the productive struggle while expanding the range of feedback available.

Conclusion: Redefining Success in Film Education

The broader implication is that film schools should redefine success. The goal is not to produce finished works but to cultivate competence, confidence, and understanding. Projects can be returned to later in graduate study or professional contexts when students possess the experience needed to sustain a coherent vision. At the undergraduate level, the focus should remain on the process of learning itself.

This perspective also responds to the transformations brought about by digital technology. In a world where

production and distribution are accessible to nearly everyone, the real scarcity is no longer equipment but connection. Social media platforms, now overflowing with audiovisual material, make this even clearer. Visibility is uneven, attention is fragile, and relevance depends on whether a work circulates and resonates within networks.

The ability to build relationships, collaborate, and sustain networks has become the central challenge. Dramaturgical judgment must be cultivated alongside this ability to connect. Relationships are the outer framework within which such judgment gains meaning.

Film education must therefore strengthen both dimensions: dramaturgical judgment and social engagement. Students should learn not only how to see and listen, but how to work with others, how to enter communities, and how to exchange knowledge. The creative economy now depends less on the ownership of means and more on participation in networks. Learning to collaborate, to share authorship, and to sustain dialogue is as important as mastering composition and editing.

Technique changes quickly but judgment and relation endure. For example, to learn cinematography, it may be more valuable to practice drawing to train the connection between the eye and hand and equally valuable to practice conversation to train the connection between self and other. Both prepare the artist to engage with the world.

Several trajectories deserve attention. First, the constraint-based model described here was developed for a directing course but its logic, inclusive of structured exercises, immediate feedback, and progressive complexity, applies to other filmmaking disciplines such as screenwriting, cinematography, editing, sound design. Each could benefit from a parallel redesign that replaces ambitious personal projects with targeted, iterative exercises calibrated to the specific

grammar of the discipline. A coordinated reform across disciplines would transform the undergraduate program from a sequence of mini-productions into an integrated training system.

Second, as generative AI tools mature, the boundary between simulation and production will blur. Students may soon be able to generate rough visual drafts of entire scenes not as finished work but as sketches to be discussed, revised, and eventually realised with human actors and crews. This extends the feedback cycle from the current four stages (analysis, actor rehearsal, technical rehearsal, and shooting) to include a preliminary AI-assisted previsualisation stage, further increasing the density of learning. The pedagogical challenge will be to ensure that this acceleration serves as a reflection stage rather than replacing it.

Finally, the equity implications of constraint-based pedagogy require investigation beyond a single institution. If standardised exercises genuinely reduce the advantages of prior cultural capital, this finding will have implications for film schools in contexts of high social inequality, not only in Brazil but across Latin America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, where access to filmmaking resources remains deeply uneven.

This article has argued that project-based film pedagogy, inherited from the auteur tradition, is structurally misaligned with the developmental needs of undergraduate students. Drawing on Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, Csikszentmihalyi's flow conditions, and Haught-Tromp's work on productive constraint, it has described a curriculum redesign at USP that replaced personal short films with structured scene exercises. The documented outcomes — reduced conflict, improved technical proficiency, increased student confidence — are based on practitioner observations and require formalisation through systematic assessment. AI enters this framework not as a co-equal concern but as a tool that can

multiply cycles of practice and feedback without replacing the human judgment that education is designed to develop.

That, I believe, is the task of film schools today: to create the conditions for continuous learning in a world of constant change, and to prepare not only filmmakers but people capable of feeling, connecting, and collaborating with one another and, increasingly, with intelligent machines.

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