Creativity in the COVID-19 Crisis: Might the Current Student Adoption of Pre-Visualization Re-Center the Cruciality of Constructing the Mise-en-Scène?

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Film Production students in higher education often overlook the critical importance of articulating a creative vision through pre-visualization during preproduction. Consequently, for several of them, it becomes difficult to showcase a poetic mise en scène in a finished work of film, since this typically involves critical constructions of audiovisual symbols expressing themes of the script. As this paper will attempt to show, unless stipulated in the assessment criteria and copiously reiterated, students tend to decenter this creative part of preproduction. Their focus tends, instead, to be skewed towards the logistical and ethical demands of production. This imbalance is a concern since the ability to construct and articulate a creative vision is a key skill for students of film directing. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) references "creativity" a number of times in its benchmarks for communication and media, specifically expecting that students are able to "initiate, develop and realize distinctive and creative work." [1] [#N1] It also expects them to "be adaptable, creative and reflexive in producing output." [2] [#N2] Meanwhile the Job Profile page for directing in the ScreenSkills website begins: "Directors are the creative leads of the film. They hold the creative vision throughout the whole process." [3] [#N3] It goes on to specify: " It is the job of a director to imagine the script in a visual form." [4] [#N4] In the creation of student projects, however, these skills can become lost amid the logistical demands of the work.

Since this paper specifically focuses on students of film directing, we replace the term, "creative vision" with *director's vision* or the *directorial vision*. [5] [#N5] Several works agree that the director's vision means the overarching audiovisual approach of the (student) director to telling a screen-story, but this definition is problematized by its inattention to the collaborative support which the directorial vision normally requires to thrive. [6] [#N6] [7] [#N7] [8] [#N8] In reality the director typically collaborates with the creative Heads of Departments (HoDs) to

collaborates with the creative Heads of Departments (HoDs) to reflect the directorial vision in the mise en scène of a story, and, indeed, the constituent elements of mise en scène justify why the directorial vision usually needs this collaborative approach to filmmaking. [9] [#N9] Though it has been described as a "grand undefined term" and theorists take different views as to what it includes, mise en scéne still provides a recognizable and established frame of reference, suitable for film analysis. [10] [#N10] In its broadest sense, it includes production design, color scheme, lighting, actors' performance, diegetic sound, as well as framing (comprised of camera position, depth of field, aspect ratio, movement). [11] [#N11] [12] [#N12] We also concur with John Gibbs who holds the view that editing is part of mise en scène, since it informs what and how a viewer can "see" a film. [13] [#N13] Based on these various elements which interconnect to construct the mise en scène—and by extension the film—we stress that while the director engenders and leads the directorial vision, the collaborative support of the HoDs is essential to its effective articulation. The analysis of the sample portfolios for this study will therefore be carried out with this perspective.

For the purpose of this analysis, it is also imperative to unpack the process of pre-visualization in filmmaking. The term pre-visualization refers to the audiovisual breakdown of the (complex scenes in a) screenplay, in accordance with a director's vision. [14] [#N14] [15] [#N15] [16] [#N16] Increasingly, filmmakers consider it as a crucial part of preproduction planning. The process is initially deployed to articulate the directorial vision by constructing a visual sample of the story's mise en scène, and in doing so, proactively test the clarity and feasibility of the vision. It also provides the space for HoDs, from their respective artistic perspectives, to suggest the potential of diverse techniques for enriching the directorial vision, and also to test their suitability, subject to directorial approval and budgetary implications. Thus, at the core of effective pre-visualization are the cultures of critical collaboration. The sample of the mise en scène produced at the end of this trial process is termed the pre-visualization document. Depending on the budget of a production, this document can be in the form of relatively inexpensive annotated sketches, or a capital-intensive audio-visual animation.

In the following sections, sample portfolios from Level 5 Undergraduate (UG) assessments of a film directing unit suggest that until the COVID-19 pandemic paused principal photography, students of film directing typically emphasized the logistical and ethical aspects of preproduction. The sample demonstrates how the restrictions dictated by the pandemic led students to rethink the creative crux of film directing, since in its wake, they were unable to shoot their films. The data also shows how this shift enabled some students to adopt a more critical and collaborative approach to directing, as they pre-visualized their films. In reviewing these samples, we suggest that on average, students have become more receptive to

arguments for centering their preproduction work equally on the creative and the logistical elements. Their skillsets of problem solving, critical practice, and innovation have also been challenged and enriched. Therefore, this paper argues for the centering of pre-visualization in the Higher Education curricular of directing. With examples from Hollywood and African film industries, we stress, too, that the value of pre-visualization in the curricular enhances student employability since its practice is increasingly prevalent in several (inter)national film industries.

Methodology

We conducted a comparative analysis of undergraduate student work from one directing unit in the 19-20 academic cohort (COVID-19) against student work from the same unit in the preceding 18-19 academic cohort (pre-COVID-19). This unit focuses solely on directing in film. The unit runs alongside other specialist units that concentrate on other aspects of filmmaking, such as screenwriting, cinematography, production design, editing, and sound design. Out of a total of 82 assessed portfolios for both years (46 in the 18-19 cohort; 36 in that of the 19-20), we selected a sample size of 40 portfolios, with 20 portfolios selected from each academic year (see Tables 2a and 2b). For each of the two sets, 8 portfolios were second-marked, and the External Examiner remains "in agreement with the range of marks and individual results" for each cohort. The teaching staff was the same for the two years. Strangely, the gender balance was identical between both cohorts (66.6% male in both years). Having established that the cohorts were of similar size and experience, we must now focus on the differences between them.

Table 1: Sample size for study

	Unit size	
	Pre COVID-19 18/19	COVID-19 19/20
UG unit	46	36

The pre-COVID-19 assessment for all cohorts required a completed short film to be submitted along with preparatory documents including shot lists, storyboards, as well as sound design and editing plans, respectively. However, the national lockdown led to the COVID-19 assessment being altered to a portfolio comprising of a short (2−5 mins) video essay that articulated a directorial vision for a film, including:

- A clear directorial vision for the story (aided by ideas of metaphors/motifs crafted for the purpose),

- A production-design plan,

- A shot list, and storyboard ideas, with considerations for the foreground, midground, and background of the frames,

- A plan of how to collaborate with the actors, according to any acting, theory/theories, and or concept/concepts of choice, aimed at supporting actors to effectively understand their characters and bring them to life,

- A plan for how the sound-design will enrich the narrative,

- An editing scheme for the story,

- A proposed timeline for achieving the project in the form of a Gantt chart.

It is this portfolio, and in particular, the video essay compared against the preparatory documents of the previous cohort, that forms the focus of this study. Obviously the pre-COVID-19 students had to go on to actually produce their films, which constitutes a different emphasis and workload in relation to the assessment. However, this forms part of our argument, around the decentering of the directorial vision amidst the logistical pragmatism of actual production. Therefore, the comparative analysis is looking through the preparatory documents and video essays for evidence of the collaborative intentions of the students of film directing to utilize these filmic elements to express their visions.

Comparative Analysis

Data from the 2019 assessments confirms that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the argument for centering pre-visualization was often lost since the demands of the ethical documentation and logistical planning dominated the attention of the students (see Table 3). Nevertheless, three out of the four highest scores in this cohort affirm a commitment to critical practice and collaboration, delineated by the qualities of their pre-visualizations. For example, one portfolio includes a drama film reflecting sterling performances, motifs of a fractured friendship, and an engaging cinematography in addition to a realistic science-engineering workshop where the protagonist builds a time-traveling robot.

Table 2a

Data from Pre-COVID-19 Assessment (2019 Cohort)					
Range of Highest Scores	Number of students	Range of Mid-Score	Number of students	Range of Low Scores	Number of students
80% - 89%	4	60% - 69%	3	40% - 49%	2
70% - 79%	4	50% - 59%	4	30% - 39%	3

Table 2b

Data from COVID-19 Assessments (2020 Cohort)					
Range of High scores	Number of Students	Range of Mid scores	Number of Students	Range of Low scores	Number of Students
80%	2	60% - 67%	3	41% - 47%	3
70% - 78%	6	50% - 56%	5	32%	1

The aim here is not to insist that good films can never be made without pre-visualization. As a matter of fact, Table 4 below relays 5 excellent scores achieved with little attention to pre-visualization (although the two other sections of the assessment brief also provided opportunities for high scores, even when a student did poorly in that of the short film/video essay). For these students, documented plans indicated little or no collaboration with HoDs, meaning there was no effective pre-visualization.

Table 3

Data from Pre-COVID-19 Assessment (2019 Cohort)	
Portfolios with evidence of previsualisation	3 portfolios
Portfolios with little or no evidence of previsualisation	17 portfolios
Portfolios with evidence of approved RA	19

Table 4

Data from Pre-COVID-19 Assessment (2019 Cohort):	
High scoring portfolios with little or no evidence of previsualisation	
Number of portfolios	Scores
1	80%

1	78%
1	76%
1	73%
1	70%

In comparison to the 2019 samples of portfolios, that of 2020 which is based on the COVID-19 compliant brief shows a remarkable shift towards pre-visualization. These portfolios demonstrate that 9 students made genuine attempts to engage with this process (see Table 5); some samples contain videos of discussions with HoDs/actor(s) to illustrate this. In these portfolios, the focus on creativity does not diminish attention to logistics and ethics. Instead, what is unearthed is that pre-visualization helps these students consider more profoundly the associative risks, time constraints, and budgets of their directorial vision. In one instance, the pre-visualization unbundles the depth of collaboration required for directorially envisioning the difficulties of adoption. With supporting records, a student discusses, amongst other things, how they collaborated with their actors to enrich their understanding and interpretations of troubled adopted twins. They also evidence how they led their team to pre-visualize the color palette, sound, and edit to test their vision. In another instance, a student pre-visualizes their vision for a story on the Ottoman empire. Through documented reconnaissance, casting, storyboarding, and production designing, they test how their ideas, supported by collaboration, can articulate the empire's cultural and period settings, as well as their plan for the film to be rendered in the fast-fading Bulgarian-Turkish dialect.

One can argue that, unlike that of 2019, this cohort is yet to prove the ability to transfer the pre-visualization *onto* a finished work of film. What cannot be dismissed, however, is that the 2020 cohort are not new to production, and so the skillsets for translating plans to practice are present even though not yet tested at this depth. What is clear is that several students in this 2020 cohort appear equipped for industry-standard directing. They have largely met the QAA expectation that upon completion of Level 5, students have an "understanding of the principles in their field and how to apply them, broadly." [17] [#N17] Notwithstanding these successes, the majority of the students still favored the ethical and logistical demands in their pre-visualizations. This highlights the case for more strategic planning in centering pre-visualization in curriculum and assessment design (see second row of Table 5).

Table 5

Data from COVID-19 Compliant Assessment (2020 Cohort):	
Total number of portfolios with evidence of previsualisation, logistical and ethical documentation	9
Portfolios with little or no evidence of previsualisation	11
Portfolios with evidence of approved RA	19

We argue that pre-visualization is important to student learning not only because it enables them to develop their ability at polishing a directorial vision and work collaboratively, but as summarized in the introduction, it is increasingly becoming a key industry practice. For time constraints, one instance of pre-visualization in Hollywood and neo-Nollywood are relayed here: in the *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), Howard Shore emphasizes that to create the sound design, he first sought to understand the directorial vision of Jonathan Demme because he knows that the feeling of an audience is constructed by all the production elements. [18] [#N18] Similarly, Demme practiced subjective/point of view shots with the cinematographer Takashi Fujimoto before employing them to create vantage sights of Dr. Lecter's sociopathy (Anthony Hopkins). [19] [#N19] Demme also suggests that Jodie Foster's views about her character Clarice Starling during pre-visualization helped deepen his vision for the film's sub-plot. [20] [#N20] Its editor, Craig McKay, subconsciously advances the case for pre-visualization when he recalls the problematic process of planning the edit *during* principal photography, when it was impossible "to reach" Demme to know his vision for the style of cuts in the scenes. [21] [#N21] McKay would settle for linear cuts, contrary to Demme's vision for parallel ones, but had later to amend them to fit the directorial vision. This correction took three extra days. [22] [#N22]

The second example of strategic pre-visualization is the neo-Nollywood movie, *Living in Bondage* (Ramsey Nuoah, 2019), about greed in the postcolonial context of Nigeria. Its producer, Steve Gukas, was particular about the movie appealing to an international audience while retaining its Nigerian accent. [23] [#N23] To this end, the HoDs were commissioned from Nigeria, Mozambique, Senegal, and the UK, and led by a Nigerian director. Furthermore, ideas from Gukas were incorporated into the directorial vision and tested through collaborative stages of pre-visualization. The result is a film which nuances Nigerian cultural essences through an Anglo-American three-act narrative. Alongside these, it employs certain Kubrick-esque high angle shots and psychologically explorative sound design. Thus, through pre-visualization, the producer's original concept has travelled from ideation to screen, and achieved the intended global distribution through Netflix.

For educators, there are some serious challenges in promoting effective pre-visualization by students. One of these lies in a preoccupation with the logistical organization and facilitation of productions that characterizes not only students but also many of the staff involved in delivery of practice-based programs. Given the legal, ethical, financial, and reputational issues attendant on these arrangements this is understandable. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, moreover, has been to add a whole additional layer to our existing processes of risk assessment and project management, just as it has for international film industries. [24] [#N24] [25] [#N25] [26] [#N26] For our students, then, access to equipment, as well as assessment eligibility, are contingent on the successful completion of time-consuming documentation reflecting careful and detailed planning. At the same time, students rightly see their skills in these areas as potentially giving them a competitive edge in the job market. The resulting environment may not always be conducive to nurturing the kinds of extended creative process that feeds into an effective pre-visualization.

Meanwhile educators must wrestle with the more general time constraints necessarily imposed on both unit delivery and student projects—constraints only exacerbated by the uncertain, ongoing effects of the pandemic. To prioritize pre-visualization within the curriculum, or indeed within assessment, is to deprioritize something else. We would argue, however, that the centering of industry standard pre-visualization is essential to any program that purports to offer an industry-relevant education to students of film directing. That, if we are to avoid accusations of promulgating ersatz production practices striving instead to strategically synchronize learning environments with industry needs, then pre-visualization must be a core element of the student's skillset. [27] [#N27] [28] [#N28]

The challenge therefore lies in striking the balance between ethics/risk-assessment skills, and pre-visualization skills. Our experience of teaching directing under the restrictions of the lockdown has been that pre-visualization has been re-centered in our pedagogy. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there is more to be done. Not all our students have achieved proficiency in this respect; some have continued to prioritize logistics, others have failed to engage with the collaborative creative process at all. Notably, as our data shows, some have achieved good project grades despite weak pre-visualization—raising questions about the proprieties embedded in our assessment criteria. Informed by this small study and our experiences of teaching in lockdown, we are now reviewing our assessment in order to ensure that we graduate students who are not only proficient in logistical skills but collaborative, creative, visionary thinkers.

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Filmography.

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