

Film

Filmmaker Eyal Sivan: 'Becoming the spectator of your own work'

Artist in Residence filmmaker Eyal Sivan believes collaborative reflection and research are key to developing new approaches to filmmaking and film education. He worked closely with Film master's students, contributing to the school's examination of its changing role in the face of technological, economic and artistic developments. 'How can we bring process – rather than production – into the academy?'

In conversation with Marijke Hoogenboom and Mieke Bernink, head of the Film master's course, Eyal Sivan explores his radical interpretation of research in film and the unique position of the study programme.

Mieke Bernink (MB): Eyal brought together two important interests of the Film master's programme. First, there's his very concrete research-based practice – the interrelationship of making and thought are so crucial to him. And second, it was an opportunity to sort out various ideas on research in film and be more explicit about the position this master's programme wants to take.

Film research is traditionally very instrumental and very project-driven – or project-restrained. You do what's necessary to make the film you want to make, but there is hardly any understanding of the project as part of a larger whole, or that it might serve the making process to occasionally step back and look at what you've done. There's little understanding of reflection as a stepping stone to something else.

Eyal Sivan (ES): More than being project-driven, research in film is production-driven. What's really important for us here is the relationship between research and efficiency of production.

I think the film school in general is going through a radical revision of its identity, and that's because of the simple fact that you can't build a programme on skills anymore. Students entering a film academy today already have the skills, so they aren't starting from scratch anymore; there's film, sound and editing software on every

computer. This new reality of technical and productional conditions means you have to totally redefine the division of labour.

Today's accelerated production process leads to a lack of reflection, but the fact that you're working alone and confronting yourself actually increases the need for reflection – and the need for the time and skills that requires. Traditional film schools are starting to understand that there are plenty of possibilities opening up for research, whether that's to keep up with technological developments or for financial reasons.

The framework of this master's programme offers a twofold opportunity for the field. The students are here to reflect and research, but as a practitioner this kind of teaching becomes an input for my own work too. The questions we're sending out to the world of cinema are, 'Do you do research?' and 'What is your process?' And these questions will attract filmmakers who can identify with those terms of reference.

In that sense Mieke's master's programme is refusing to live by the division between traditional film studies, on the one hand, and film skill schools, on the other. It's a bridge; it's making a statement about the future.

Marijke Hoogenboom (MH): Given that production isn't the primary goal, what was the output of your research with the students?

ES: I suggested creating a closing 'proposal event', an evening taking a single proposal as a framework, with a conceptual exhibition showing fragments of work we did with the students. It would be a fantastic way to propose a project and it would invite the students to not restrict themselves to formats they already know.

MB: This idea of 'making a proposal' rather than a finished product could help immensely in communicating research to an audience. Even if that proposal includes a film, people will look differently at it because of its framing as a proposal. The

proposal is a source from which a new project might emerge in the future. In film, when you're production driven, you are not articulating why you're going from project A to project B. But when you look back, the reasons are obvious.

ES: We could radicalize your comment: you say 'we go from one project to another,' but we could also ask, 'What's your definition of a project?' or, 'What's your aesthetic or political project?'

Nowadays, you get seven minutes to pitch your project. Once you've got a real proposal, you'll be able to pitch it, but you need to find genuine forms for it, not just a formula. What does it mean to say, 'I am proposing'? Inventing the proposal itself is showing the potentiality of it. We are working on many more platforms today than just the single screen. This implies different modes of presentation, and also different sources of finance – beyond film or television funds. So students need to learn to address different modalities.

MH: How would you characterize the most important developments in cinema that necessitate this research-based approach in the master's programme?

ES: A big problem is that the tradition of cinema is anti-intellectual. There's always this negotiation between the popular mainstream and individual, subjective forms. At the same time cinema is about the visible. It's never about the invisible, about the process itself. The moment you start thinking about the process of your work, you're deconstructing the machine of cinema, and that's something young filmmakers have a lot of difficulty dealing with. The Film master's has the big advantage of having students that don't arrive with the idea of making audience-oriented work, and they want to integrate the need for thought from the outset.

There were a few moments in the history of cinema when there was a link between the thinking and the method. In Nouvelle Vague, for example, we see a methodological attitude that sprang from dealing with impossibilities. The impossibility of going into a studio created a relationship with real space, for

instance. Only then did the stories come in. In a way Nouvelle Vague was a conceptual laboratory.

I'm interested in the kind of cinema research where the project or output of production is secondary. The moment we remove production as the goal, we're removing the industrial element of cinema production. Researching then means separating the work from production – you're allowing the filmmaker to go on a detour. But in cinema we still have to learn how to leave the options open for fabricating the sort of residue and superfluity you traditionally find in the visual arts. The question for the Film master's is how can we bring the need for process – rather than production – into the academy. It's a major challenge.

MH: I suppose this approach to research could invite a contradiction between cinema as a collective work and a master's course as an individual process. How can you address students' individual questions while getting them to collaborate and negotiate differences?

ES: That's one of the most complicated problems. We can put it in sociological terms: our generation has the legacy of rejecting structure. We dreamt of a master's course with an open framework. But the current generation of students is asking for structure. But what structure is appropriate for this time? Would it be a step backwards if we were to reintroduce the master to the Master's, for example?

Cinema doesn't have the tradition of 'the master', not even in the primary sense of an atelier where people work around the master. We've got to build it from scratch – going against the tradition of cinema.

It's because of their tradition of the atelier that visual arts today are challenging both documentary and fiction. The atelier isn't about authority of knowledge; it's about authority of experience. It's about the ethos of the master, not the figure of a master. It's about not being in a different position from the students: our exchange is a shared research situation rather than a master-student situation.

I didn't make a separation between my own work and the work with the students. I tried to figure out how I could listen to the students and let that reverberate into my own situation. In fact I used the students' work as a space for working on my work. Mieke gave me the opportunity and confidence to reflect together on the master's programme and on the meaning of research. The AIR project became my lab. It's an example of what it can mean to theorise through practice: the practice involved in creating a process with the students and simultaneously testing it with them. On a very individual level it allowed students to voice their concerns, with me working beside them in the group.

This notion of theory through practice led me to ask the students a simple question: 'What are you doing?' I got them to reflect on the labour – on the concrete engagement of the physical body in work. We should also ask 'When are we working?' It's not just about the time you spend in class; it's also the hours that the job demands.

We found we had similar experiences. One common one is getting into a state of confusion, for example. Then there's the matter of mapping your work, archiving it. Commonality creates a non-artificial group. I don't believe in this idea of saying, 'We're ten directors and we'll all pretend we're a cinema crew and make a collaborative work.' No, I didn't create a structure beforehand: the collaboration came out of shared questions. And my work with the students was just about pointing out commonalities.

MH: Your question 'What are you doing?' is actually a very complex one. Artists are trained to articulate the meaning of their work, but not other aspects of their practice.

ES: Reflection is a distinct practice, of course, but I'm integrating it into the labour. For me this is connected with engaging the body and with that most important requirement of becoming a spectator. The traditional Hollywood attitude is that

there's a separation between the spectator and the filmmaker. It's as if there's an authority of emotion onscreen and the spectator is the only one facing the work. But I'm challenging the students to break down that hierarchy and to become the spectator of their *own* work.

MB: This kind of self-reflexivity adds an important dimension to the profession. That's why I'm keen to set up an Innovation Lab for the entire film academy. It will be a proposal to slow down, to think and to develop, rather than rush into production. Film schools are struggling with their traditional role as 'skill schools'. They were set up to train for the industry – even to mirror it – and they replicated the skills and workflows. In a sense they still do, but given the technological changes, the focus needs to, and can be much more on what you want to say and why you want to say it that way. Skills are just a requirement for conveying content. That makes reflection crucial.

MH: There seems to be a convergence at some levels between film and the visual arts. How do you view this relationship?

MB: I invite people from the visual arts field, as well as from the performing arts, because we're interested in the discussions that arise through including students from different backgrounds. But my mission is to create a different voice in cinema. I don't need to create a different voice in the art world.

ES: We in cinema have more to learn from the visual arts than they do from us; it's pretty much a one-way relationship. But then the issue is how to avoid becoming a cinema environment for the visual arts. It's about ensuring you're creating your own field. I think it's simply a matter of time.

At the moment there are no spaces where you can do this kind of thinking together outside of the school. There are no cinema movements or groups anymore. Dogma was the last one – and interestingly it came out of a school. I think that's significant.

MB: Apart from avoiding to become the cinema environment for the visual arts, we should also be aware of the tendency that certain kinds of films are no longer shown in cinemas but in art centres. Harun Farocki's work is a good example of this phenomenon. It's wonderful that art centres can afford to invest in research and making things public, but I'm also very worried about the tendency that sees experimental films being produced that you then have to cut into four pieces and show on four screens because it's easier to find a venue today in the art world. We're facing the challenge of having to reset the relationship with cinema. For the master's programme this includes reinforcing the collaboration with other programmes that are the future of cinema teaching and re-establishing a theoretical field.

ES: Now we're touching on the notion of post-cinema. But the moment has not yet come to renounce cinema practice, because it's still a very rich and special field of research.