

A REVIEW ON “FINDING THE PERSONAL VOICE IN FILMMAKING”

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Makal Fairclough, Ç. (2021). A review on “finding the personal voice in filmmaking”.
Etkileşim, 7, 248-252. doi: 10.32739/etkileşim.2021.7.128

*This study complies with research and publication ethics.
Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.*

“Finding the Personal Voice in Filmmaking” (2018) offers a unique insight into the process of creativity, into how artists can find that ‘something’ that needs to be expressed and develop it into an authentic narrative. Erik Knudsen is a filmmaker, researcher and teacher. Each aspect of his experience informs and enhances the book. His perspective on the creative process, for instance, is enriched by his own personal experience as a filmmaker. There is a particularly insightful section on ground-breaking films where Knudsen’s practical knowledge of the forms and processes of filmmaking is evident. This is an erudite and fascinating book. Knudsen draws on his extensive research and knowledge, not just of filmmaking but media and the arts more broadly, as well as other relevant academic disciplines such as psychology, to give the book substance and depth and to support his arguments. There is a section on creativity that draws on examples as diverse as an advertising campaign by Benetton and the scientific discoveries of Archimedes. Knudsen also brings to the subject of creativity the impassioned and inspiring voice of a teacher. At several places in the book he directly addresses his imagined audience, other filmmakers, encouraging them to overcome obstacles and find their personal voice. The book contains practical guidance for filmmakers including case studies from a research project and even includes exercises to stimulate idea development in the appendix. Knudsen is clear about the purpose of the book: ‘My aim is...to introduce you to some new insights of wider significance that will hopefully be of use in your own creative exploration and expression’ (2018: 3). He is seeking to create ‘an applied theoretical reflection that can be of practical use to cinematic storytellers’ (2018: 12). He is clear about what the book is not about as well: ‘This journey is not about the craft of creating and shaping stories into cinematic stories’ (2018: 4) as there are many other books

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that cover that territory. 'Finding the Personal Voice in Filmmaking' focuses especially on the early stages of idea creation, the relationship to our deepest motivations and how to 'protect and nurture the essence of a story' (2018: 4).

'Finding the Personal Voice in Filmmaking' is underpinned by what Knudsen refers to as the democratisation of filmmaking. Knudsen is fascinated by the rapidly evolving filmmaking context and the explosion of filmmaking in various parts of the world, including in countries such as Ghana. He draws parallels between what is happening now in the world of film to what happened centuries ago with the written word. With the development of new technologies, the world of film is becoming more accessible to new practitioners just as centuries ago the invention of the printing press gave greater access to the written word. Filmmaking is no longer limited to those who have attended elite film schools and new business models are emerging to challenge traditional film production companies. Inspired by this context, Knudsen set up a research project called 'The Storylab International Film Development Research Network'. Knudsen wanted to explore the impact this democratisation process was having on the stories independent filmmakers were interested in telling. The project involved practice-based film and media researchers from Ghana, Colombia and Malaysia as well as the UK. Knudsen refers to the interdisciplinary research approach that he adopted for the Researchlab project as 'Ethnomediaology', describing it as follows: 'the active and immersive participation of researchers in the research culture and creative media creation process, using active personal engagement as a basis for knowledge generation, data gathering and evaluation' (2018: 3). Workshops were conducted which encouraged the participants to explore their deepest motivations and to develop stories that were unique to them. The research from this project runs as a thread throughout the book with case studies included in the chapter on 'Transformations'. Knudsen's focus on encouraging aspiring filmmakers to explore their deepest motivations points to the central thesis of this book, the connection between the personal and the universal: 'What is personal then becomes universal. Paradoxically, perhaps, the more personal we get in our expressions, the more universal the consequences and impact of what we reveal' (2018: 4).

The book consists of an introductory chapter, three chapters that explore the nature of creativity and a final chapter on 'Transformations', which includes a summary of the ideas in the book. Each chapter helpfully has an abstract, an introduction, a set of notes and a bibliography. The three core chapters on the nature of creativity are entitled 'Why Create', 'What is Creativity' and 'Why Story'. Each of these chapters contributes to the overarching theme of the book around developing a personal and authentic artistic voice but they also work as stand-alone essays. Each chapter has a compelling and coherent line of argument. In Chapter 2 for example Knudsen discusses the reasons why we create and argues that it is a matter of necessity: 'Perhaps the only way of properly describing this urge or impulse is to think of it as necessity. It

is necessary to create' (2018: 19). He proceeds to show how this necessity derives from our feelings and emotions: 'We are aware of this necessity through our feelings and emotions' (2018: 21). These feelings and emotions lead the creative artist to become aware of 'something' that needs to be expressed. He describes this something as follows: 'This something is emerging from a place where there is no form, no shape, no time. It is emerging from the unconscious and the only initial connection we have with it is that we can feel it' (2018: 23). Once this something or 'fragile notion' starts to emerge, artists are then moved to create, a process that will involve collaborating with others and sharing one's 'innermost personal feelings' (2018: 25). Here, as elsewhere in the book, Knudsen makes the crucial link between the personal and the universal: 'what is intensely personal turns out to be paradoxically universal. What we think might differentiate us from others, conversely unites us and brings us together' (2018: 25). Knudsen draws on the theories of Carl Jung and the concept of the 'collective subconscious' to support this link between the personal and the universal. In this chapter, Knudsen argues convincingly that there is a necessity about the creative act. He also explores the journey of a fragile notion, which initially reveals itself as a feeling or emotion which needs to find expression. He takes that notion on a journey 'through a creative and industrial process, through an expressive form, to the impact in the hearts and minds of others' (2018: 17). It is a compelling and entertaining narrative.

There are recurrent themes throughout the book. As well as the connection between the personal and universal, Knudsen returns throughout the book to the importance of feelings and emotions in creativity. He suggests that emotions such as fear and anxiety are self-assertive in nature whereas feelings such as love are participatory in nature, allowing the individual to merge with the wider environment and with others. As we have seen, it is a recognition of these feelings and emotions that is at the heart of why we create. In the chapter on 'What is Creativity' Knudsen describes the role of play in the creative process and emphasises the need to develop a state of mind that allows ideas to emerge. He describes the process as follows: 'There is a letting go and trusting of the unconscious movements of our feelings and emotions' (2018: 57). Knudsen returns to the importance of feelings and emotions in the chapter on 'Why Story' and relates each separately to a different narrative form: 'As storytellers there are themes embedded in our stories that may best be told through an engagement with our audience's self-assertive emotions, themes that may best be told engaging through our audience's participatory feelings, or perhaps a bit of both' (2018: 89). Knudsen argues that in Western society there is a tendency for the narratives to engage our self-assertive emotions whereas in other societies, which are less dominated by materialist world views, there are more examples of transcendental narratives that engage participatory feelings. In the concluding chapter on 'Transformations' Knudsen suggests that denial and fear are the two great obstacles for filmmakers and suggests that people sometimes conveniently deny that they

are attracted to certain stories because of their own personal feelings and emotions. According to Knudsen, the creative process at each stage calls for courage and this involves being honest with oneself about our deepest motivations, our feelings and emotions.

Throughout the book there is a strong link to the concepts and language of psychology. As we have seen, Knudsen draws on the theories of Carl Jung, especially around the 'collective unconscious'. He refers also to Jung's concept of 'archetypes' and how that links to prototypical stories. The language of psychology however pervades the whole book. In the chapter on 'Why Create' Knudsen points to the consequences if we do not respond to the necessity to create: '(...) we become unsettled, unhappy, disturbed and, in extreme cases, depressed and angry' (2018: 26). He describes what happens when emotions take hold, referring to 'fight or flight' and the 'sympathetic nervous system' (2018: 22). In describing a case study involving one of the Storylab participants he describes the process by which the participant was able to come to terms with conflicting feelings and refers explicitly to a 'therapeutic outcome' (2018: 62). Knudsen refers again to 'flight or fight' (2018: 88) in the chapter on 'Why Story' in relation to the self-assertive emotions. As mentioned above, Knudsen refers to two contrasting types of storytelling: '...on the one hand what I call psychological realism in which our emotions are engaged through our sympathetic nervous system while on the other hand what I call a transcendental realism in which our feelings are engaged through our para-sympathetic nervous system' (2018: 89). The language of psychology permeates the whole book as it relates to the core theme around feelings and emotions. The book gives the impression that the creative act, from the original development of an idea through to the narration, is a form of psychological therapy and that those who do not find their personal voice risk some form of psychological harm.

In his summary Knudsen again speaks directly to his audience 'you, the filmmaker' (2018: 112) but this book is likely to have broader appeal. The section on ground-breaking films for instance (2018: 64-75) which Knudsen describes as 'cinematic examples of creativity at work' (2018: 75) is likely to appeal to any media student, or anyone with a passion for film. The book will also be of interest to other academics, especially those involved in practice-based research. This book provides a passionate and personal endorsement of the value of filmmaking. It is likely to inspire emerging filmmakers or possibly filmmakers experiencing some form of writer's block, looking for ways to develop their own authentic and personal voice. The central thesis of the book on the importance of exploring the deeply personal in order to be able to communicate something that may be of universal interest is convincing. It does however raise some questions which the author himself goes some way to addressing. Many great artists clearly do not consciously explore their 'deepest motivations' and operate in a much more instinctive way. It is worth noting that it was only from the time of the Romantic movement that

artists started to self-consciously put their own emotions and feelings at the heart of their work. Knudsen includes a quote from Mozart: 'My ideas come as they will, I don't know how' (2018: 56). Knudsen himself points to the potential problems of filmmakers trying to understand the nature of creativity and overthinking things: 'But from a filmmaker's perspective, wishing to find that personal voice, conscious thinking of these issues, as we have discussed earlier, will likely not lead to creative decisions and acts' (2018: 76). There is a paradox here as the book itself is highly reflective and will stimulate thinking around these issues. Be that as it may, this book achieves its stated aim of creating an applied theoretical reflection that can be of practical use to cinematic storytellers. But it also does a lot more. It provides a unique and fascinating perspective on the creative process which will be of wider interest not only to academics and creative artists but also the engaged general public, the audiences who are themselves so vital in the creative process.

References

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Conflict of interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial support: No funding was received for this study.

Çıkar çatışması: Çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

Finansal destek: Finansal destek bulunmamaktadır.