

# San Francisco Chronicle

## **Celluloid is so 20th century -- film schools are switching to cheaper high-def digital**

Justin Berton, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Maria Bernal-Silva, a 28-year-old film school student, awoke at 6:30 a.m. on a recent Monday to hold a boom mike above two actors in Potrero Hill Park. It's hardly the glamour job on any set, but for Bernal-Silva, who is enrolled at the San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking, the opportunity to work on the feature "Around June" amounted to progress, compared with her last stint in a film school.

"I became an expert in writing thesis papers and sitting in a classroom with 100 people," Bernal-Silva said of her time as a cinema major at San Francisco State University. "I became skilled at theory, but not in actual production." She eventually graduated after shooting a 10-minute short on a 16mm Bolex camera, even though she was unable to take a directing class in the overcrowded program.

Bernal-Silva represents a growing number of aspiring directors who are choosing to attend digital film schools that offer little, if any, instruction on shooting celluloid, the material on which movies have been made for more than a century. Two digital film schools have opened in the Bay Area since 2005, and most universities with film departments are switching over to the digital technology that students desire for its affordability.

Among other things, this means that the days of film students like Spike Lee and Robert Rodriguez maxing out credit cards to fund their celluloid senior projects may soon be ending. A high-definition camera can now capture an entire movie on an \$18 tape. So students willing to pay tuition -- the San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking charges \$22,000 for its one-year program -- won't go deeper in debt when it comes time to shoot their final project.

Tom Edgar, co-author of "Film School Confidential: The Insider's Guide to Film Schools," said the number of private digital schools has increased noticeably in the past few years, and the shift toward high definition video at academic film schools is catching on.

"The supply is popping up to meet the demand," Edgar said of the digital gear. "It's changed everything. Once you needed to pay \$12,000 in tuition to use \$100,000 in equipment. Now, with digital, you can spend \$10,000 and own everything you need to shoot a film."

Edgar said when he attended New York University 20 years ago, students enrolled mainly to get access to the expensive machinery. Nowadays, "the whole reason you go to film school has changed. You go to learn how to work with actors, how to write a compelling story, how to work with a crew. And to devote a year of your life to it and not have to deal with the realities of life."

Melinda Levin, president of the University Film and Video Association, an academic organization of more than 100 film schools including NYU and the University of Southern California, said most accredited departments nationwide are switching over to high-definition cameras to keep up with the industry changes, and operate a "hybrid system" of film and digital. But for some future auteurs, Levin added, it may make more sense to shun the university route.

"People are now doing it on their own outside the academic setting from preproduction to post," Levin said, noting the rise of YouTube and digital film festivals. "And in the end, are they losing out by not learning the broad history of cinema? For them, perhaps not. They just want to tell their story."

The number of private digital film schools remains small. The first, the Digital Film Academy, was founded in New York City in 2000. The San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking opened in 2005, and the Berkeley Digital Film Institute began taking students in September. Both eschew the usual film-history courses and head straight toward vocational training. The dig on digital film schools is that while students may learn how to maneuver a high-tech camera, they are less likely to master screenwriting skills that can be honed in the classroom.

But Patrick Kriwanek, who opened the Berkeley Digital Film Institute, said his students tweak at the keyboard as much as with the lens. "The script is still god," Kriwanek said. "If they can't write it, we won't let them shoot it."

Kriwanek served as dean of the Academy of Art University motion pictures and television department for six years before he opened his school, and said he tired of watching students be unable to finish their thesis films because of the cost. Kriwanek estimated that his students now pay 50 cents per minute to shoot on HD, compared with as much as \$200 a minute for 35mm film. The savings on digital allows more stories to be told, he said.

"It's a real boon to my students to shoot without caring about the costs," he said. "It's made film school utterly democratic."

Jeremiah Birnbaum, one of the founders of the San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking, said that when he opened the school in 2005, it was an acknowledgment that high definition was eclipsing film in the new-media age.

"The way people are going to be consuming media, be it phones, handheld computers, PlayStation portables, YouTube -- it all relies on HD," Birnbaum said.

Feature-length films like "Around June," shot on digital, are becoming more common in Hollywood. Last year, two major releases, "Superman" and "Miami Vice," were shot on high-definition cameras, and director Rodriguez announced that he has shot his last reel of celluloid, permanently converting to digital.

Jim Goldner, a professor at the San Francisco State cinema school, who helped launch the department in 1963, agreed that digital is a cheaper alternative in the long run. But he noted that whereas the film cameras the department bought in the 1960s are still operational, the digital cameras the college invested in five years ago are already obsolete. "Shooting a film will eventually go away, we know that, but it's still the industry standard," said Ray Rea, a full-time lecturer at State who negotiated the department's first loan of a high-definition camera, which arrived on campus last week. Rea said that over the past few years the department has undergone a "quantum shift" in postproduction work, thanks to digital editing software like Final Cut Pro.

The digital revolution has flooded film festivals with entries, Rea noted, and a short that first appeared on YouTube won an award at Sundance last month. The shifting landscape, Rea added, has placed an emphasis on storytelling quality.

"We tell our students, 'Yours had better stand out for content,' " Rea said. "It's great that more people have access. A counterpoint is that just being able to do more is not always a good thing. We see a lot of self-indulgent work."

Looking back, student Bernal-Silva said, the traditional film school experience had left her unsatisfied and unconvinced she'd find a job on today's film set. She's about to enter her short "The Maze," a story about two people trapped inside a video game, to the reality TV show "On the Lot," which follows Steven Spielberg as the director seeks new talent.

"When I look on Craigslist and see the jobs listed, I say, 'Yeah, I can work on that camera.' When I think about the film I made on a Bolex 16mm, I think, 'What am I going to do with that now?' "

*E-mail Justin Berton at [jberton@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jberton@sfchronicle.com).*