

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMERGING TRENDS IN FILM PRODUCTION METHODOLOGIES

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I am interested primarily in how the new paradigm shifts in digital technology and the democratization of the filmmaking process allow filmmakers to connect to an 'expert' global niche audience with more immediacy through the internet, engaging virtual communities, crowd funding and fan building initiatives and a variety of social media landscapes.

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With the new paradigm shifts in the film industry, cheap digital technology and the democratization of the filmmaking process, filmmakers now can connect to an 'expert' global, niche audience with more immediacy through the internet; engaging virtual communities, utilizing crowd funding support and fan-building initiatives through a variety of social media landscapes.

NEW PRACTICE METHODOLOGIES

My own work has revolved around two kinds of practice; the first, a traditional methodology invented by the Hollywood studios, which, from a small independent filmmaker stand point proved futile at best. With little to no resources to pull off a production like the big studios do, with their huge studio budgets, political backing, global media support and accounting practices, today it seems a waste to pursue an independent film production in this manner. The second practice is participatory filmmaking. This method enables others to articulate their experiences through my artistic vision via cheap digital technology and social media. It is through this process, they have just as much (or little) control as possible as the filmmaker. But, why you ask would filmmakers want that?

"What defines the documentary genre is also at the root of its limitations...here, I shall call for a different perspective on documentary form: not with a view to discussing what documentary is, but to make some suggestions of what it could be." (Knudsen, p. 109)

In creating the participatory film project and case study entitled: *Single Girl in a Virtual World: What Does a 21st Century Feminist Look Like* my practice aims to engage multiple social media communities such as; Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Wordpress, YouTube, Kickstarter and IndieGoGo and ask people to participate in the film project itself with a sense of creative input. During the production, I have asked the communities to read the film site's blog, watch podcasts, comment on news feeds and follow me on Twitter. These efforts are the practicalities necessary for audiences to participate in the film project itself – either creatively, financially or both.

The project's content has begun to emerge and appears in its raw shape as a video diary of sorts, with participants weighing in on the topic of the week, freely giving their insights, thoughts and feedback through the multiple social networks – either in video, textual or both. For the filmmaker, this serves as a rich valley of resources that can be integrated in the film's narrative. However, when attempting to construct a narrative thread by gathering content in this way, it brings up many potential problems. "Recording a video diary, if you don't want it to become public, is a risk; perhaps more so than a written diary, because the medium of video implies a mass audience." (Rothwell, p. 154)

One of the exciting things about these new possibilities for filmmakers and audiences alike, despite the potential ethical pitfalls, is the creative flow of information, access to resources and sharing of content. Independent filmmakers who are limited on budget, time and production technologies can gain a tremendous amount of quality production value by sourcing content in this way.

Whichever way they came into the community, the goal is to keep them there, involve them in the production efforts and keep them just as excited as you are about the project. And to do that, there must be a transparency between the creator and the fan-base participating in the project itself. This covers a multitude of scenarios such as; copyright issues, ethical boundaries, life-rights, video-audio rights and original content ownership. By simply asking for their permission seems to be fair enough for their participation. "Key to the success of that relationship is that it demands a responsibility for the consequences of the filmmaking that go beyond the film itself." (Rothwell, p. 155)

When I started this case study, I had an overall fear of intellectual property thievery; which stemmed from my traditional, Hollywood studio practice experience. "Rather than oppose this "illegal activity," we welcomed the pirating and began distribution directly to the pirates at production cost value." (Blagrove, Jr., p. 176) Delightfully, once I began my practice in this participatory way, I could begin to see it actually had many benefits of being 'stolen' and shared virally. The more I blogged and podcasted calls-to-action the more activity my social networks would see, more members would sign up for my news feed, follow me on Twitter, 'Like' me on the *Facebook* page, and read my *Wordpress* blog. Then of course, the whole idea of this process was once they were fans within my social networks, they would participate and share content I could then use freely in my film.

VIRTUAL AUDIENCES

"The on-going conversation with your audience can be a source of inspiration, motivation and ideas. It's this powerful new link with the audience that the old power players don't understand." (Kirsner, p.4) I can no longer imagine going back to a traditional filmmaking practice hoping to make a modest living, or even attempt to have a sustainable career by playing by the old rules of the studio production and delivery system. The windows of financing and distribution are just too complex, too expensive and too long of a cycle to have any hope of quick returns on investments or to gain access to huge marketing budgets for global exposure of film product.

"By empowering ordinary people to speak as experts, they question the basic assumption of dominant ideology, that only those already in power, those who have a stake in defending the status quo, are entitled to speak as if they know something" (Juhasz, p.304). It is with this notion that is measuring how social media, digital technology, alternative production methodologies and various new delivery strategies

are providing information on the impact of the film's message and its creative process. Does this mean the film is suitable for a theatrical release?

My practice is showing that audience participation does, in fact, impact both the audience and the filmmaker inherently by creating art in this way. Instead of outsourcing functionalities to other resources in a traditional sense, I had to become an all-encompassing expert. But, one now asks the question - who is in control? Who is the 'auteur' with the vision? What happens if the film's narrative thread goes off-track? Who are the performers and what ethical considerations are at stake?

How can I draw an audience into the reality of the situations being dramatized, "to *authenticate the fictionalization?*" ...what are we to make of films where real people apparently 'play themselves' (or variations on themselves), or hybrids where a combination of actors and non-actors improvise in a documentary-like scenario?" (Ward, pg. 192) It is the originator's role to ensure that the participatory environment also abides by the community rules of transparency, honesty and attributes of authentic form. "Notions of performance in documentary are therefore potentially controversial – accusations of people 'not being themselves' or 'playacting' are rife, and are deemed to be a central problematic for a film's documentary status or credentials." (Ward, p. 192) Otherwise, not seeing these participants in person; looking them in the eye – how is the filmmaker to know what is factual or fictitious?

A greater embrace of innovation and experimentation in this method is needed in leveraging these projects with the ability to fail without showing loss of value. Technological knowledge and new creative approaches to build communities and better business models that filmmakers and artists alike are needed. It is possible to achieve a quality film production with inherent.

By engaging in filmmaking practices in these fundamental ways, a shift of power away from the larger powers of the studios, and back into the hands of the creative filmmakers and their loyal fans should be embraced, not feared. "The question for makers, consumers and scholars of moving images are what distinguishes documentary online from documentary made for other channels, and whether the internet has any distinct, useful or unique characteristics that offer documentary anything more than just another means of distribution." (Birchall, p. 279) A process of creative flow, execution and community outreach is a necessary part of this practice and to maintain a sense of shared community.

TECHNOLOGICAL SHIFT

A profound new shift in mindset was needed to set off on a new course of practice; even though outcomes are uncertain. "First, in organizing geographically diverse individuals around a common interest in watching or making documentaries, there are new forms of community; second, new means of creation and distribution...to seek to change people's minds or reinforce a viewpoint; third, we have increased access to 'dirty reality' in the form of footage of current events and violent conflict; and fourth, video diaries and other moving images give us an increased range of intimate access to the lives of other people." (Birchall, pg. 179) Differences in workflow patterns, a means of gathering content, and a creative approach within high production value considerations, compromises and technical limitations stretch limits on what is possible.

Thousands of entries, news feed comments, tweets, sharing of videos and user-generated content (UGC) from YouTube and other rich video sites by community members fill the coffers of content. Skype interviews became a relevant resource of production activity for capturing remote interviews, even though the media is still not high value. During this process, I discovered because I was developing a rich social network, people I knew in my personal social circles; friends, family, co-workers, business associates, etc. suddenly became keenly aware of the project I was making and were eager, or at least willing when pressed, to participate in the project.

User generated content (UGC) has been the most pervasive amount of content, shared and streamed by my community members so others can comment, share and watch within the framework of the film's websites. "By contrast, the easy availability of material to work with online is matched by the ease of remixing and redistributing." (Birchall, p. 280) This aids the independent filmmaker who need open-source, archival clips in order to create a film narrative. There are ethical and intellectual rights considerations, however that must be mentioned.

It is also important to note, because technology is cheap, social media pervasive and artistic democracy entering the creative fold, doesn't mean the value of the art or the filmmaker behind its creation should be valued any less. "People made information about themselves available on the internet in such a way that theoretically anyone could see it, but in practice few did." (Birchall, p. 281) The reality of the new entrepreneurial filmmaker is not only making just a film project, but rather building a community of like-minded people who want to support a film project and future projects – in essence building a sustainable brand. This takes an inordinate amount of time, effort, management and technical troubleshooting. Not to mention, technological requirements, necessary to connect all of these networks in a functional and significant way - once they are functional and put in motion, should self-perpetuate. This is an ongoing resource of time and labor that must be considered.

The benefits in making art in this way far exceed the amount of time and effort it takes to build an online brand and identity. Other filmmakers too, are building sites with the intention of creating a sustainable business model, as well as attracting a built-in fan base that can't be bought with traditional advertising and press campaigns by the larger studios. The case study of *Four-Eyed Monsters* by Arin Crumley was a forerunner for this social media movement. Films are now being made everywhere and there are audiences out there who are looking for them. Audiences, however, are fickle, but entrepreneurial filmmakers have a distinct advantage over the big studios by creating art that is meaningful and creatively autonomous, while building a loyal fan base, which will enable the artist to self-sustain.

PARTICIPATION

Does the 'audience' participating in the early stages of a creation raise expectations for the audience? What about for the filmmaker? Does it impact the artist's methodology of creation itself?

Participation between audience and filmmaker enables each to develop a relationship that goes deeper than merely one from a consumer or isolated artist's point of view. It becomes a two-way process; although being auteur and the creator of the project, driving the subject matter, its pacing and narrative criteria, provided an overall control and direction for the project. It is important to note, that

its subject or method itself wasn't diminished in value, nor did it have the perception of being an amateur product. In fact, it's been the opposite, which emphasized stronger value for both the filmmaker and the project being created with the audience. The process has allowed a more authentic, accessible and transparent relationship to develop amongst the community, which makes the film's subject, and experience, more tangible. Having the film aimed specifically towards a key, niche audience, seems to make them keen to be involved and stay invested for future projects. It is the script or narrative and production value which must be the best possible so there is a perception of professionalism throughout the production.

The community does, in fact, communicate amongst themselves and will certainly 'police' any activity that does not acquiesce within the group. This 'policing' by the community assures transparency, trust, authenticity and protection against spam and unwanted advantages a filmmaker or other community member may seek to squeeze information and/or money out of its community for personal gain. "The immediacy of new online forms should not be mistaken for a lack of mediation...authenticity is highly prized by audiences." (Birchall p. 282-283)

There are certain sacrifices that must be made outside of the normal filmmaking agenda; such as engagement in crowd sourcing campaigns, new technological learning curves and social media training, traditionally hired out (i.e. media partners, technology programmers, sales/fulfilment houses, marketing firms) must be learned. There are many perceived benefits, as well as challenges in this new era of digital technology and social marketing tools that are advantageous for both the filmmaker and their audiences.

Measurable changes in production practices must also be adhered to by utilizing these online tools and cheaper production technology. How does this change the storytelling process?

Technological considerations must be made for the lack of financing and a large crew. The entrepreneurial filmmaker is now essentially a 'one person crew' where every single shot, direction, post-production/editing, writing, producing, marketing and digital online development and management can be achieved with the sole artist. Aesthetic compromises are also at stake. However, it is worth noting that with small cinema, mobile and online video distribution choices that are growing every day, there are many outlets of distribution that do not require a 35mm or HD production aesthetic to tell a story. Ultimately, the script is still at the heart of every film – it is only the methodology and system of delivery that has changed. "The film business remains a single product industry. The product may be available on many different platforms, but it is still the same thing." (Hope, 2010)

With the attraction of crowd funding sites such as, Kickstarter and IndieGogo, financial resources are now available for filmmakers, who don't have access to rich uncles, mix with the Hollywood investor crowd, or can fund their projects across a mass of credit cards. "Expectations have changed considerably, probably completely. Buyers and audiences behaviors are different, those that still remain that is. Products are valued at different levels. We live in a new world. Our strategies must change with it." (Hope, 2010) The production and fundraising of a film in this style is beginning to produce a more valuable, sustainable, niche-market product and is changing the traditional market structure of distribution and delivery for independent filmmakers outside of the Hollywood system. It is also providing a platform for artists in countries without the support of film communities, government subsidies or fundraising activities. This enables a global access to films and stories that might otherwise never be told. "On the face of it, *Kickstarter* is pretty harmless, and I think the founder's intentions are good. It's great that people can raise money for cool things from the crowd. It's hard to raise money, especially for the arts, and

there have always been a lot of gatekeepers in the way. Now, the people can decide what gets funded.” (Newman, 2011)

Still, further questions for scholarly and industry debate continues. Will it be profitable? How can a filmmaker, who makes a film online for free ever hope to see a profit, much less sustainability? For Hollywood, what affects the bottom-line ultimately, is the question they [studios] are waiting to see emerge profitable.

CONCLUSION

If it is profitable, how will this change the open democracy of the ‘wild west’ we see now in this new trend? Will it continue to be available and ‘free’ to all or be monopolised, packaged and sold as IPO to the highest bidder forcing filmmakers to go through yet another middleman to make their films? Will these online, participatory, transmedia interactions incentivize the audience to buy the finished product and any subsequent ancillary products associated with the creative product? What about future projects the filmmaker produces? Can there be added sustainability in this model? These questions and more that arise through research and practice will continue to merit further question and research. With arts funding continuing to dwindle, such as the reduction in grants and lottery funding, filmmakers have turned to crowd funding to finance their livelihoods – but will the audiences enable that to become a reality, or will the studio systems in place prevail?

“Creators, Distributors, and Marketers have accepted a dividing line between art and commerce, between content and marketing. By not engaging the filmmakers in how to use marketing tools within their narrative and how to bring narrative techniques to the marketing, we diminish the discovery and promotional potential of each film.” (Hope, 2011) On a larger scale, projects in this realm will emerge answering the question of how this new methodology of filmmaking relates to a wider economic, cultural, environmental and social scale.

References and Notes:

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