

Rethinking Fiction Filmmaking: Unpacking the Collaborative Process and Challenging the 'Cult of the Director'

by Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon

Conference Paper, May 2025

Technology and Film Labour: Crafting the Look of the Film



Rethinking Fiction Filmmaking: Unpacking the Collaborative Process and Challenging the 'Cult of the Director'

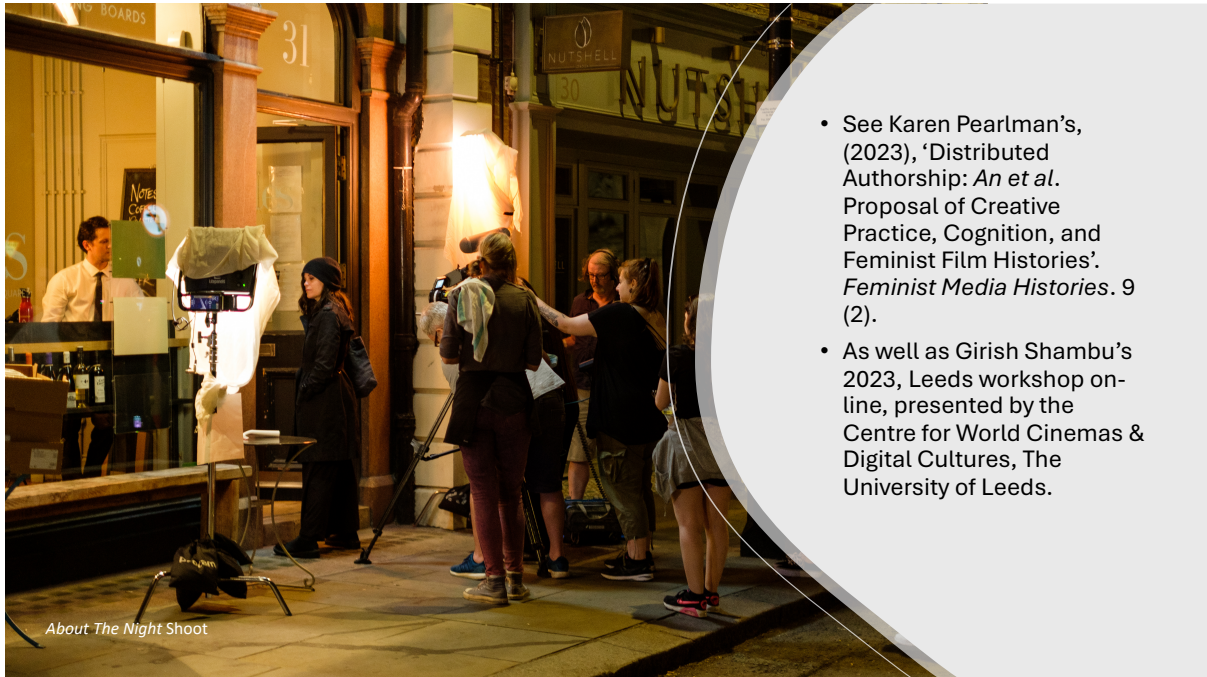
Technology and Film Labour:
Crafting the Look of the Film, May 2025

Dr Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon

About The Night Shoot

- This paper ‘**Rethinking Fiction Filmmaking: Unpacking the Collaborative Process and Challenging the 'Cult of the Director'**’ draws on my experience as an **independent** filmmaker and comes out of a larger **practice-led research project** around **collaborative working** processes in **fiction** filmmaking.
- Core to this project was a **short fiction** film called **About the Night**, which I was the **producer/director**, working with a **small crew** of both **professional** practitioners and **masters** film production students.
- My aim was to **critically** examine and reflect on the **micro-level creative process** within an **industrial (or professional) model** of film production to inform **broader practices** that challenge **Hollywood hierarchical structures**—both in terms of **content**, as well as **organisational dynamics**.
- A **secondary** aim of my research was to **push** the boundaries of **narrative** form—not fully into experimental territory, but rather to **explore** the space that approaches its **edges**.
- However, in this paper I aim to **reflect** and **share insights** into the **production process** more than discuss **narrative strategies**, so we **can** consider how we

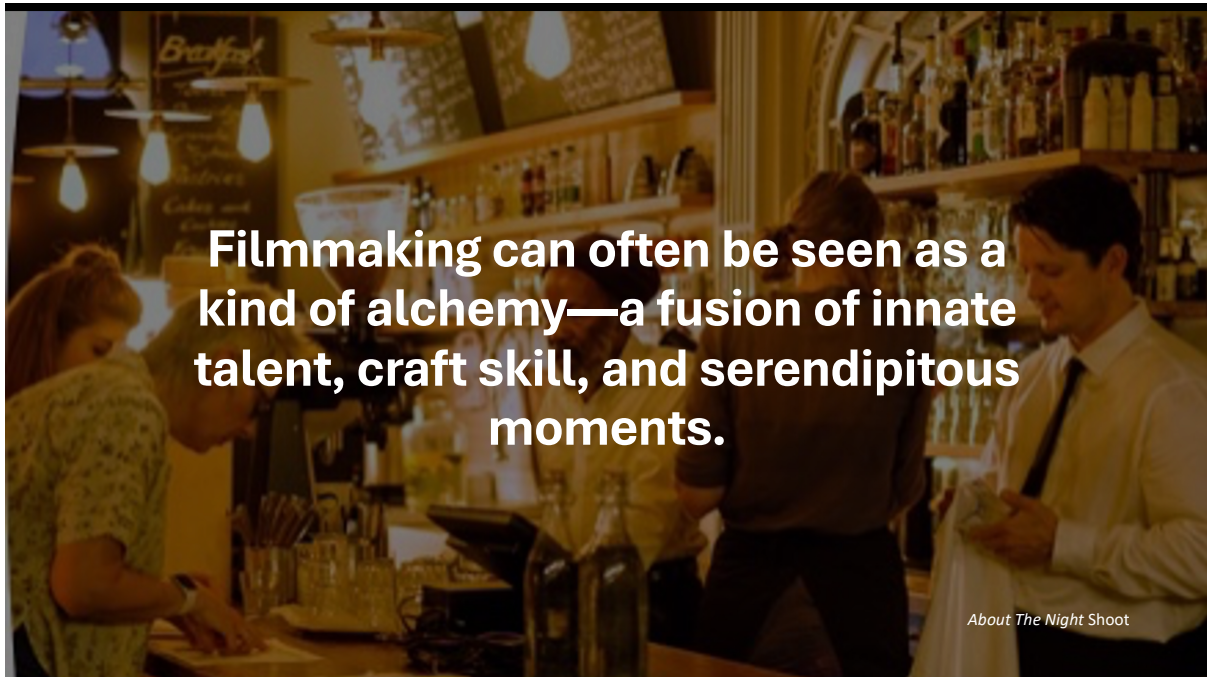
might **reshape** our practices, **pedagogies and** produce more **research** in this area.



- See Karen Pearlman's, (2023), 'Distributed Authorship: *An et al.* Proposal of Creative Practice, Cognition, and Feminist Film Histories'. *Feminist Media Histories*. 9 (2).
- As well as Girish Shambu's 2023, Leeds workshop on-line, presented by the Centre for World Cinemas & Digital Cultures, The University of Leeds.

- As a **critically engaged** filmmaker and **educator** in production practices, my research uses **practice-led methods** to explore how **creative decisions** are made and **who** gets to make them.
- One of my **research** concerns is the **systemic barriers** that **limit access** to **key** creative roles, especially for those from **underrepresented** backgrounds, and how **structural inequalities** in the UK screen industries affect **career progression**.
- A central **focus** of my work is the **persistence** of the **auteur model**, which, **although** widely challenged, remains **deeply embedded** in industry and academic discourse.
- My proposition is that by making the **creative process** more **visible** and better understood, we can begin to **reframe** filmmaking as a **more fluid** conception of **creative identity**—one that fully recognises all **film labour** as potential **collaborators** and **cultural workers**.
- However, despite **technological** advances that enable more **democratic** production practices, the director continues to be **privileged** as the **sole author**, while the **creative** contributions of the **wider workforce** remain **largely invisible**.

- By emphasising the **ethical** implications of **authorship** in fiction filmmaking, I aim to **highlight** the need for **shared creative ownership**, particularly through **feminist** and **decolonial** frameworks that **restore visibility** to collaborative film craft and its role in the production of meaning.
- I am not the first to do this, see Karen Pearlman's work and Girish Shambu's Leeds workshop on-line.



- Filmmaking is an **inherently complex** practice, shaped by **constant negotiation**, **collaboration**, and the **potential** for **disruption**—where acts of creation are **deeply entangled**.
- It involves a **continual** process of **thinking and doing**, while working creatively with others to **shape the story** as the **production** unfolds.
- This process actively **generates knowledge**, as every **department**—from lighting to costume—plays a **crucial role** in **creatively** bringing the story to life.
- However, **filmmaking** is often perceived as a **form of alchemy**—a **blend** of **innate** talent, craft skills, and **serendipity**.
- And while this **mystique** can create **excitement** and intrigue, it **ultimately** proves **unhelpful**, as it **perpetuates** the 'cult of the director,' overshadowing the **collaborative efforts** of those who work **diligently** to bring a film to completion.

- Although there is nothing **new** in what I am saying I wanted to utilise **process-led reflexive praxis** to **explore** and **foster** a **deeper engagement** with **collaborative** working **practices**.
- Just to note, this **process** is on-going, and this **paper** represents some of the **outcomes** of the project so far.



- For me, I wanted to challenge the **conventional** view that **fiction production processes** lack **academic research** value because of the notion that they are **industrial** and **hierarchical**.
- If **fiction** reflects our **ideals, fears, and aspirations**, as a **society**, I believe it is **essential** to understand, not just the **text itself**, but **production practices** that shape our films.
- If, as Mark Travis suggests, fiction filmmaking is “**storytelling the hard way**,” then it is essential to **scrutinise** the **complex production models** that underpin it—particularly to **identify** how we might innovate **more** inclusive ways of working that do not **reinforce barriers** for **underrepresented** workers.
- What I discovered during this research process was just **how** complex and **collaborative** the **artistic** decision-making process was.
- I realise this is easy to say, but somehow, we **do not** have much **evidence** to **demonstrate** just how **complex** and **in what ways**.



The labour of filmmaking is often invisible in critical discourse, subordinated to the myth of the auteur, despite the fact that creative input is distributed across departments and roles.

— paraphrased from Caldwell, J. T. (2008). *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Duke University Press.

- John Caldwell's **foundational** work, *Production Culture* in 2008, highlighted how the labour of filmmaking is often **rendered invisible** in critical discourse, subordinated to the **myth** of the auteur, even though **creative input** is **distributed** across departments and roles.
- He emphasises the importance of "**below-the-line**" workers as essential to the **creative process**.
- And although Caldwell introduced the idea of "industrial reflexivity" to describe how the industry reflects on its **own** working **practices**, academic research has not **substantially** expanded on this to **interrogate** just how **filmic meaning** gets made.
- The **intellectual** and **creative** labour that takes place across departments remains largely **unexamined**.
- Again, this stresses that filmmaking encompasses complex, **collective decision-making** and reveals the **limitations** of **evaluating** creative work solely by what appears on screen, or by what **personal messages** the director is trying to get across.



- Filmmaking involves continually **shaping the story**, using **technological** advancements to **manipulate elements** and **construct fictional** worlds.
- This **process** demands a continuous **myriad** of **creative** and **technical** decisions to produce a **coherent narrative**.
- I suggest that it is this **cohesion through collaboration** that **elevates** fiction film **craft** to the level of both an **intellectual** and **artistic** endeavour.
- As Sarah Atkinson and Helen Kennedy (2017) argue, screen production is not simply the realisation of a **pre-existing script** or **vision**, but a distributed, collaborative, and evolving **creative process** that generates **new forms of knowledge**.
- While **fully** capturing the **complexities** of this process within a **single** research project may be unachievable, I believe it is a task that can—and should—be approached by a **range** of researchers using **diverse** methodologies and perspectives.
- So, part of my aim **has** become **thinking** through an **initial** framework for my next project, and **potentially** for others.

“The focus on artworks, rather than practice, has produced a gap in our understanding of the work of art as process ... The concept of material thinking offers us a way of considering the relations that take place within the very process or **tissue of making**.”

- Barbara Bolt, 2004.



- Academic and artist Barbara Bolt (2004), who in her discussion of the creative process draws on **Heidegger**, argues that the **traditional** emphasis on **completed** artworks rather than on the **practice** itself creates a **significant gap** in our understanding of art as a **dynamic, evolving process**.
- Bolt introduces the concept of "**material thinking**," which she **defines** as “a way of considering the **relations** that take place within the **very** process or “**tissue of making**.”
- Framing production in this way helps **contextualise** filmmaking as a **dynamic** and **evolving** process—one that involves a delicate **balance** of creative and **technological** decision-making.
- This perspective gave me a **conceptual** way forward to **explore** and **expose** the true **complexity** of the production process within my **own** production context.



Friction

- I was **unfamiliar** with the term “**material thinking**” when I began this **research**, but it **emerged** as I tried to **make sense** of what we had experienced **collectively** as a crew.
- **Bolt’s** notion of the “**tissue of making**” provides a **tangible** way to **reflect** on the **entangled, embodied, and collaborative** nature of the **creative** process in filmmaking.
- This concept emphasises how the ‘**act of making**’ is not merely a **technical** endeavour, but a **dynamic interplay** of materials, ideas, and collaborative energies.
- However, there is another **element** to factor in – all the **practical difficulties** and **setbacks** that are encountered along the way.
- These are **important** as they can **lead** to a form of **tension**, or what I want to call **friction**.
- This **arises** through **collaborative working** and is an **important** aspect to **acknowledge** and **critically** reflect upon.
- While the term **friction** was yet another term, I had not used at the start of my research process, it has emerged as an **apt descriptor** for the **challenges inherent** in both the **collaborative creative process**, and in **understanding** the **driving** force behind the **narrative conventions** employed in filmmaking.
- I have come to really appreciate this term **friction** as it gives us a **distinct concept** that is different to the notion of **conflict**, and I would suggest can be seen as much more **productive**.

- The sparks and the energy give a **sense** of producing **forward motion** and it is this **energy** that enables **creativity** rather than **disables** it.
- Being able to **document** and discuss this **process**, means we can **acknowledge** that this **process** is marked by **numerous points** of **friction**, where the process can be **disrupted** or **compromised**.
- How, we **collaboratively** and **creatively** work through this ‘**material thinking**’ seems to me to be a **crucial way** to foreground production practices **and** has the potential to take **mystery** out of the process.



The dynamics of friction are caused by CREATIVITY (intent) encountering the CONTEXT (story) and the COMPROMISES (reality).

- To **critically** explore the **collaborative nature** of filmmaking is to **reflect** on the **inherent complexities** of bringing something previously **non-existent** to life.
- **Friction**—often **mistaken** for **conflict** and viewed as a **hindrance** within the **risk-averse** cultures of film and TV production—can, in fact, be a **powerful** driver of **creativity** and **innovation**.
- Despite the **desire** for a **smooth** process, **filmmaking** is invariably marked by **setbacks**; on our production for *About the Night* the **most significant** was the pandemic, which **halted** production for over a year, and **profoundly** impacted the **crew**, cast and the **final** artefact.
- For me as a director, every **creative decision** should be a **negotiation** with **collaborators** not a **dictate**, constantly **balanced** against **story-needs** and **budget constraints**, which lead to **inevitable compromises**.

- The **dynamics of friction** are caused by **CREATIVITY** (your intent) encountering the **CONTEXT** (the story or understanding of it) and the **COMPROMISES** (which the limits put on you by the reality of the situation you are in).
 - I want to **emphasize** that this creativity is not solely the director's but **shared** across all workers engaging with the script to bring the film to life.
 - Breaking down these **dynamic** reveals potential **pinch points** and the need for **strategic** documentation—something I struggled with during production.
 - Lacking a **dedicated researcher** and unsure of what to **record**, I have made do with what I **capture**, but to next time this will be a **crucial** part of my project.
- (1:53)



- This dynamic, where **creativity, content, and compromise** intersect, underscores the **perpetual presence** of **friction** within the **collaborative process**.
- It also highlights the pressures that everyone faces in **high-stakes environments**, which **influences** what **type of person** can take certain roles particularly **on-set**.
- Werner Herzog once described **filmmaking** as a **contact sport**, and he wasn't joking.
- But this raises an **important** question: does it have to be this way?

- In **mainstream** environments, with a **risk-averse production culture**, creative possibilities can get **stifled**, which I would argue **narrows** the scope of what gets made.
- It can also **stifle** workers **creativity** and **hamper** the **collaborative** process.
- For me, recognising and embracing the **collaborative nature of filmmaking**—including its **inherent frictions**—is crucial to preserving a **film's artistic integrity** or dare I say it, **radical potential**.
- I also want to **propose** that when it comes to **doing** anything **different** than the norm, it often **restricts** anything more than the **dominant** mainstream **Hero's** journey story.
- If filmmaking can be seen as a **kind of alchemy**, then revealing the **intricate** processes of meaning-making between below-the-line and above-the-line workers becomes a worthwhile and **necessary** endeavour.
- The mystique around the **director's role** as the main author of the text, does seem ludicrous considering what I am saying, as it masks the **critical evaluative** work that goes on for **all film labour** at any given **moment** on a film, from hair and make-up to film colourists.

(1:45)



Friction

- By acknowledging rather than **resisting** it, we can shift production culture toward more **inclusive**, less **adversarial** practices.

- My research suggests that **friction**—often seen as negative—**can** be a **constructive** and inevitable force in filmmaking.

- Creative collaboration, especially **under tight budgets** and **high stakes**, requires constant **negotiation** between **content**, **creativity**, and **compromise**.
- These pressures don't fall solely on the **director**; decisions are **distributed** across **departments**, making friction a **structural** feature, not a **failure**.
- By acknowledging rather than **resisting** it, we can shift production culture toward more **inclusive**, less **adversarial** practices.
- Currently, the industry tends to favour dominant personalities, which risks excluding those less inclined toward conflict—impacting who gets to shape meaning in film.



- To finish on I want to mention an example from the production of *About the Night*.
- As a script, *About the Night*, did not have a **traditional** story-arc, it has an **experiential** narrative leaning.
- The writer and I did not, and still do not think, we **pushed** the boat out all that far, however, I **did** understand that it was not a **conventional script**.
- And as the **director** I had to be **mindful** that the **style** and **form** of this **piece** was not obviously on the **page**.
- My **primary objective** was to depict **fictional events** with **minimal manipulation**, aiming to foster **empathy** without imposing **emotions** on the audience.

- Rather than striving for a **naturalistic** representation, my approach was to **construct** an **experiential window** that mirrored the **evocative tone** of the script, inviting viewers into a **subtly crafted moment**.



About The Night Shoot

- Briefly, the story centres on Josh, a young waiter, and Mia, a woman **seeking solace** in a late-night café just as Josh is **eager** to end his shift.
- The film's pitch revolved around the idea that **small acts** of **kindness** can **change** the world.
- My **goal** was to create an **engaging** narrative that captures **life's complexities** without **adhering** to a **conventional conflict-resolution** arc.
- The focus was on **minimal** manipulation, **fostering empathy** without dictating **audience emotions**, and this was challenging for me **as** the director.
- However, what was **crucial** was our **communication** and **collaboration** to **push** through and make this story **coherent**.
- Sound played a **critical** role in supporting the film's **experimental** nature by **enhancing** rather than **compensating** for the **absence** of **overt** conflict in the narrative.
- Despite on-set **challenges**—such **as** a persistent **oven** droning sound—which the sound team chose to **incorporate** as a foundational **part** of the soundtrack.
- Staying true to our **intent** not to **guide** audience **emotion** was difficult, but the sound team, who **deeply** understood the project, helped keep me on track.

- This **experience** highlighted how shared **understanding** among **collaborators** fosters **creative alignment** and how **crucial** it is for **directors** to be supported by an **invested** team.
- These moments reflect the ‘**tissue of making**’—the **intricate, dynamic** interplay of **materials, ideas, and collaborative energies**.
- What I am trying to **formulate** right now, is the way **forward** for a **bigger** project, one that has a **better** method of **documenting** this process.
- I have come to **really** appreciate through reflexively interrogating the **creative decision-making** and now fully understand that **fiction** filmmaking cannot be understood through **textual analysis** or an auteur lens alone—it must also be **examined** through its **collaborative** ‘tissue of making’.
- Only by deepening our understanding of these **processes** can we begin to challenge **entrenched hierarchies**, embrace more **inclusive** models of **authorship**, and genuinely **value the contributions of all film workers**.
- Consequently, for me, this highlights the **importance** of research from myself and others, so we can **shed** more light on all the areas of creative and collaborative production practices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atkinson, S., & Kennedy, H. W. (2017). *Live Cinema: Cultures, Economies, Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury.
- Bolt, Barbara. 2006. *Heidegger, Handlability and Praxical Knowledge*. Paper at the Australian Council of University Art & Design School Conference. Accessed 20th Augst, 2024.
- Caldwell, J. T. (2008). *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Duke University Press.
- Cave, Richard E. 2000. *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leavy, Patricia. 2016. *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels*. New York: Routledge.
- Lorenzen, Mark. 2009 *Creativity in Context: Content, Cost, Chance, and Collection in the Organization of the Film Industry*. In Jeffcutt and Pratt (eds.). *Creativity and Innovation in the Cultural Economy*. London: Routledge.
- Mackendrick, Alexander. 2006. *On Film-making: An Introduction to the Craft of the Director*. Faber & Faber.
- Pearlman, K. (2023) ‘Distributed Authorship: *An et al.* Proposal of Creative Practice, Cognition, and Feminist Film Histories’. *Feminist Media Histories*. 9 (2).
- Shambu, G. (2023). *Girish Shambu workshop Leeds*. Presented by the Centre for World Cinemas & Digital Cultures, The University of Leeds. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwBj8DlrdYk> [accessed 14-30-24].
- Sergi, Gainluca & Gary Rydstrom. 2023. *The Endless End of Cinema: History of Crisis and Survival in Hollywood*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Stoneman, Rod. 2012. ‘Chance and Change.’ In *Film and Risk*, edited by Mette Hjort. Wayne State University Press: 2012.