

## Embracing Chance and Risk: A Filmmaker's Exploration of Collaborative Storytelling in Fiction Production

MeCCSA paper, Sept 2024  
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- This paper is part of a larger **practice-led research** project around the making of fiction.
- As a practitioner and educator in filmmaking practices, my research has begun to focus on the process of fiction production and its implications around **equality and inclusion**.
- My research is still on going and therefore this paper represents the initial stages of the project.
- Utilizing **process-led reflexive praxis**, my objective is to explore and foster a deeper engagement with fiction production.

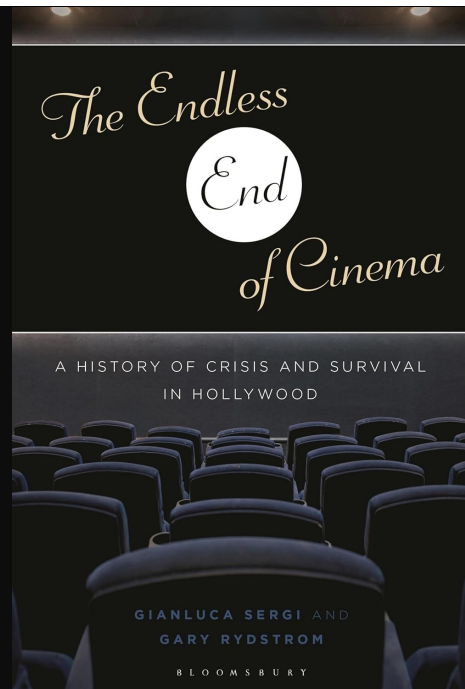
## How dead is dead?

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“Hollywood is dead... [It] initially died in 1913... [However,] after a long, crazy history of dying, Hollywood is still alive and kicking.”

– Gianluca Sergi & Gary Rydstrom  
2023: 1

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- In addressing the theme of this conference, the **pervasive uncertainty** surrounding the future of the film and television industries is **unavoidable**.
- This sense of a **continuing crisis** is not new, however, as Gianluca Sergi and Gary Rydstrom highlight in their 2023 book, *The Endless End of Cinema*:

QUOTE: "Hollywood is dead... [It] initially died in **1913**... [However,] after a long, crazy history of dying, Hollywood is still alive and kicking."

- This narrative that the industry is perpetually on the **brink of collapse** due to external pressures has been a **recurring** theme throughout its history.



*The Demise of Mid-Budget Cinema*

By Neil Iyer October 22, 2022

LINK: [\*The Independent\*](#)

**CRITICAL QUESTION:**

- Where is the space for creative risk-taking and innovation when anxiety over financial stability is on over-drive?

- Having said this, since the pandemic, heightened levels of **anxiety** have **triggered** a sustained period of **instability** within both the film and television sectors.
- In filmmaking, the growing dominance of the **blockbuster** has led to a marked decline in **mid-budget** films and a significant **reduction** in independent and art house cinema.
- However, it is not my goal to discuss issues of funding here, but to state that this **current landscape**, characterized by an **overemphasis** on economic imperatives, poses significant challenges to the cultivation of **diverse** and **experimental** storytelling.

## More than half of UK film & TV workers remain out of work since SAG-AFTRA strike, says Bectu survey

BY **BEN DALTON** | 29 JULY 2024



SOURCE: FILM AND TV CHARITY

57% in unscripted and 53% in commercials.

More than half of UK film and TV workers are still out of work a year on from the SAG-AFTRA strike in the US, according to a study by UK creative industries union Bectu.

The survey of more than 2,300 film and TV workers found that 52% of workers in the film sector are out of work; with 51% in TV drama,

The figures are down from the 68% who were out of work in a February 2024 survey, itself down from 74% in September 2023. This indicates a slow recovery; however the number of respondents who are planning to leave the film and TV industry in the next five years is increasing, from 24% in September 2023 to 37% in February 2024 and 38% now.

61% of Black/Black British, 67% of Asian/Asian British and 56% of workers from other minoritised ethnic groups are currently out of work, compared to 51% for white workers.

The precarity is restricting efforts to improve diversity in the industry, with 44% of Black/Black British respondents planning to leave the industry in the next five years, with 41% of Asian/Asian British and 40% of mixed and multiple ethnic groups, compared to 37% for white respondents.

The older the worker, the more likely they are to be out of work, with 31% of 18-24s currently unemployed, compared to 46% of 24-34s, 50% of 35-44s, 57% of 45-54s, 58% of 55-64s and 68% of over 65s.

The SAG-AFTRA strike began on July 14, 2023, running until November 9; with a Writers Guild of America strike also running from May 2-September 27 that year.

### Financial, mental health impacts

Respondents to the survey, which closed on July 12, noted significant financial and mental health impacts. 81% are finding their financial situation to be more difficult than normal given the fall in work, with 21% having had to take out a loan or unsecured debt – up from 15% in September 2023.

70% have reported struggling with their mental wellbeing – a similar figure to the 75% in February this year.

- This Feb, BECTU declared the UK film and TV industry in **crisis** due a **slowdown** in production, however, their July survey of members suggests a **minor** recovery, yet freelancers continue to face severe **financial strain**, with **38%** of surveyed members considering leaving the industry within **five** years.
- Particularly troubling are the **disparities** among **ethnic** groups with 61% of Black, 67% of Asian, and 56% of workers from other **minoritized groups** currently **unemployed**, compared to 51% of **white workers**.
- These statistics raise serious concerns about the **efficacy** of diversity and inclusion efforts and highlight ongoing **insecurities**, particularly for marginalized groups.



## New Normal

- This current state threatens not only business viability and employment, but also stifles creativity, curtails artistic innovation, and limits the production of diverse content.

- This inherent **precarity** of film and television production is **threatening** to become the "**new normal**", with ongoing struggles and uncertainty showing little **sign of stabilization**.
- My concerns here are that this **current state** threatens not only **business** viability and **employment**, but also **stifles** creativity, **curtails** artistic innovation, and **limits** the production of **diverse content**.
- This instability raises **critical questions** about the **future** of film and television production.



## Immensely complex product

"A film is an immensely complex product, integrating numerous art forms (such as writing, design, and performing arts), and the scope for combining the inputs in order to achieve new content varieties are, in Caves' (2000) words, infinite."

- Mark Lorenzen, 2009: 13

Article: *Creativity in Context: Content, Cost, Chance, and Collection in the Organization of the Film Industry*

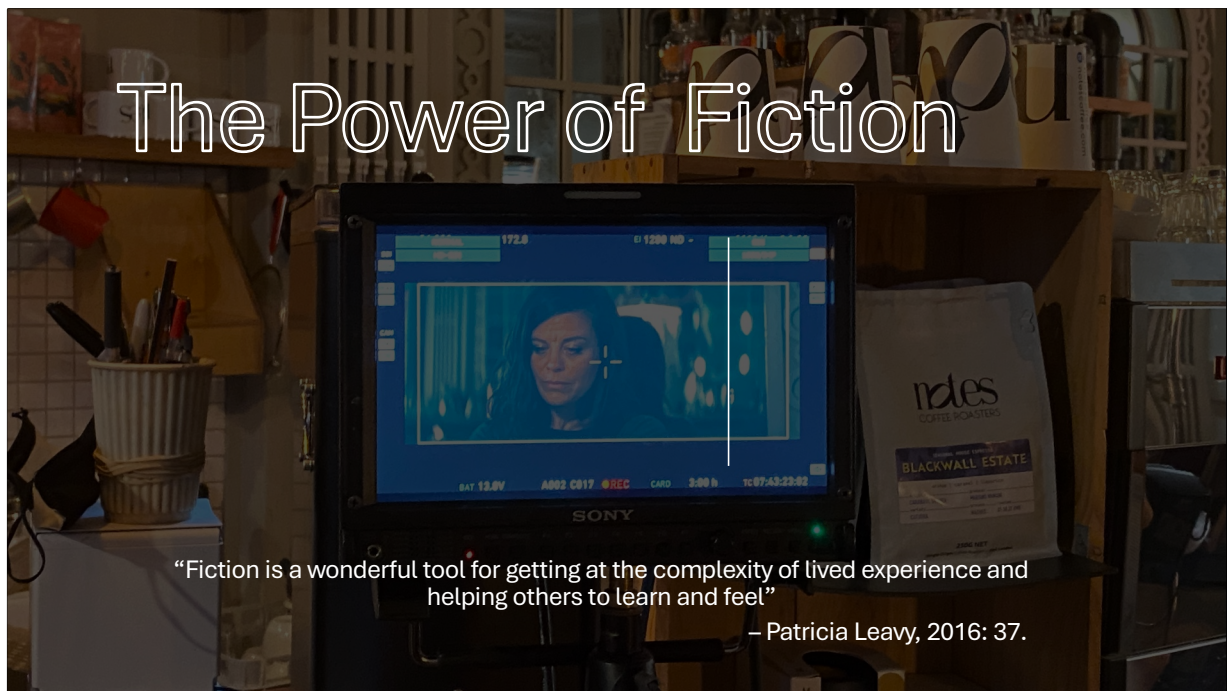
- Films, whether we are talking documentary or fiction are **immensely intricate** artefacts to create, as those of you who are involved in production will know, they encompass a **spectrum of challenges** from the development of an idea, right through to the **final** product.

QUOTE - "A film is an **immensely complex** product, **integrating** numerous art forms (such as writing, design, and performing arts), and the scope for combining the inputs in order to achieve new **content varieties** are, in Caves's (2000) words, **infinite**."

- What interests me in this quote from Mark Lorenzen's is, although film production is **complex**, it offers scope for new **content creation** with **infinite** potential.
- However, I want to suggest that, within **narrative fiction**, as it stands right now, there is limited room for **experimentation** or **different creative** voices.
- **And** if fiction reflects our ideals, fears, and aspirations, as a society, it is essential to understand the **creative processes** and **working practices** that shape these **artefacts**.

- **Emerging filmmakers**, often lacking reputation or resources, face a landscape that favours **formulaic** and **predictable narratives**.
- And despite occasional breakthroughs, a narrow view of **storytelling** with fiction filmmaking **prevails**.

# The Power of Fiction



- Drawing from my experiences as an independent filmmaker, this research looks at the **creative process** in filmmaking at a **micro-level** to uncover **insights** that could inform **broader** industry practices.
- Particularly focused on the **creative process** of producing and **directing** a fictional **short film**, this study also aims to challenge the **conventional** view that **fiction** lacks **academic research value**.
- Fiction, like documentary, captures the **complexity of life** and allows for a **deep** understanding of **human** behaviour.
- As Patricia Leavy notes, in her book, ***Fiction as Research Practice***:
  - “Fiction is a wonderful tool for getting at the complexity of lived experience and helping others to learn and feel” (2016: 37).
- Despite fictions potential, filmmaking remains dominated by a **narrow view** of what constitutes a **good narrative**, with a complex network of **gatekeepers** and restrictive processes that stifle new and different creative voices.
- However, what also needs to be re-thought is the **dynamics of the production process** as well as strategies around inclusivity to foster more innovative and diverse storytelling.





- Having participated in, and researched various production practices, I've observed that the filmmaking is often viewed as a kind of **alchemy**—a **fusion** of **innate** talent, craft **skill**, and **serendipitous** moments.
- This **mystique** is unhelpful, particularly to future filmmakers, as it contributes to the 'cult of the director,' **keeps** creative 'workers' in **their place**, and overshadows the **collaborative** efforts of those **diligently** working to complete a film.
- As director, Alexander Mackendrick noted in his book, filmmaking is fundamentally about the **process**, not **just** the product, yet research into this **process** remains **limited**, especially in **fiction**.
- Recognizing that filmmaking encompasses **complex creative** and **technical** decisions, it becomes clear that assessing these choices solely by what we see on screen, is **limiting**.
- This underscores the need for **deeper exploration**, particularly in fiction, to better understand the **dynamics of creative decision-making**.



“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.



- Barbara Bolt (2004), drawing 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.”
- As I have said, filmmaking is **inherently complex**, marked by numerous points where the process can be **disrupted** or **compromised**.
- By critically examining these **complexities**, we gain a **deeper appreciation** of the **collaborative** dynamics, the **stressful** resource-intensive nature of production, and then the **critical question** becomes, who is afforded the opportunity to take on these leading creative roles, particularly the role of the **director**.



## Dynamics of Friction

- As the director on *About the Night*, 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.
- This seemingly **restrained** approach to **fiction** was not indented to merely document a moment, my aim was to experiment with **narrative filmic form**.
- While the term **friction** had not been employed in the context of my research from the start, 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 this story.
- So, here I want to briefly focus on the notion of **friction as an alternative to the notion of conflict**.



## Dynamics of Friction: Risky venture

- **Conflict** is a narrative cornerstone to storytelling and continues to be a key component that shapes narratives and engages audiences by creating tension, suspense, and resolution.
- Although **friction** and conflict are related concepts, they are often **used** interchangeably, however, **they are distinct**.
- **Conflict** typically refers to a more intense and **direct clash** or disagreement between **parties**.
- It frequently involves **opposing interests**, goals, or values, which, within a narrative, typically culminate in **overt confrontation**, hostility, or struggle.
- Whereas **friction** generally refers to tension, disagreement, or **resistance between** individuals or groups.
- As opposed to conflict, **friction** can be **relatively mild** and may not necessarily escalate into **open confrontation** or hostility.
- However, we **taught** that **conflict** is the only way a story can be **formed**.
- My aim with this film was to experiment with the narrative of the story creating **friction** rather than **conflict**.



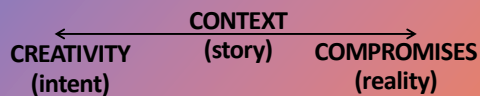


- *About the Night* centres on Josh, a young waiter, and Mia, a woman **seeking solace** in a late-night café just as Josh is **eager** to end his shift.
- The film's pitch revolved around the idea that **small acts of kindness** can **change** the world.
- As mentioned, my **goal** was to create an engaging narrative that captures life's complexities without **adhering** to a **conventional** conflict-resolution arc.
- The tension is evident when Mia enters as Josh is closing for the night, yet there is no overt conflict, even when Mia avoids eye contact and communicates only through writing.
- The **subtle shifts** in Josh's behaviour—from initial **annoyance** to **acceptance**, influenced by his **desire** to emulate his mentor, Elijah—underscore a narrative that **unfolds** without a **dramatic catalyst**.
- The focus was on minimal manipulation, **fostering empathy** without dictating **audience emotions**, was difficult for me as the director.
- **Sound** played a **critical** role in this process, as it needed to enhance rather than compensate for the **absence of conflict**.
- **Collaborating** closely with a sound designer who **embraced** the film's **experimental nature** ensured that we stayed true to our aim of **not guiding**

the audience's feelings.



## Collaborative Creative Process



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

- Critically assessing the collaborative process of creating this film requires reflexivity about the inherent difficulties in bringing something new to life.
- Friction, often seen as a **hindrance**, can be a powerful driver of creativity and innovation.
- Despite the desire for a smooth process, filmmaking is invariably marked by setbacks; our most significant was the pandemic, which halted production for over a year, and profoundly impacting the crew, cast and the final artefact.
- As a director, every **creative decision** is a negotiation with collaborators, constantly balanced against story needs and budget constraints, leading to **inevitable compromises**.
- This dynamic, where creativity, content, and compromise intersect, underscores the perpetual presence of friction within the **collaborative process**.
- It also highlights the pressures directors face in **high-stakes environments**, influencing who can take on the role and what kind of stories are told.
- A risk-averse culture stifles creative possibilities, narrowing the scope of what gets made.

- Recognizing and embracing the collaborative nature of filmmaking—including its inherent frictions—is crucial to preserving a film's **radical potential** and resisting a single, dominant **auteur perspective**.

## FEEDBACK from Festival strategist

- “*About the Night* is a very esoteric piece, almost a poem to the late night loners who drift to and from each other in the late night hours. It's a ponderous film that ask a lot of the audience to find their own meaning in the characters and the story that is being presented. There is an otherworldliness captured in the location by the cinematography, a curiosity for the characters generated by the actors.”



About The Night Shoot

- At the outset of submitting the film to festivals, I consulted with several film festival **strategists** to identify platforms that would likely be receptive to the film's **unconventional approach**.
- Despite my previous success with more **traditional narrative films**, I recognized the need for guidance.
- The feedback I received from **one** strategist was initially difficult to read, yet it proved to be **highly insightful**.
- “*About the Night* is a very **esoteric piece**, almost a **poem** to the late-night loners ....
- It's a **ponderous film** that ask a **lot of the audience** to find their **own meaning** in the characters and the story that is being presented.
- There is an **otherworldliness** captured in the location ... a curiosity for the characters generated by the actors.”
- As you can imagine I was pleased with these comments.



- However, as I read on:
- “**Unfortunately**, the film is **so open** to interpretation that some programmers may not quite be able to place it.
- It’s not immediately **obvious** what the film is intended to be about, **versus** what the audience **may choose** to take from it, and that can be a **tricky** thing for programmers.
- There is no doubt a **refreshing intelligence** to the film in that it doesn’t **spoon-feed** its intent, but it may cause **some obstacles** along the **festival** journey.”
- And boy where they correct.
- With 30 festival submissions now, the film has only been selected for four, however, it has received a nomination for **Best Director** and an award for **Best Story**.
- These **limited** recognitions underscore the **challenges** faced by films that defy **conventional storytelling** and **resist easy** interpretation. The festival circuit, however, appears to have **limited receptiveness** to such **innovative approaches**, highlighting the broader issue of accessibility and acceptance for **experimental narratives** within this space

## Dynamics of the Daring and the Possibilities of the Perilous

“We need to encourage and maximize the dynamic of the daring, the possibilities of the perilous, in order to enable the realization of new images and sounds that may contribute to social and cultural transformation.”

— Rod Stoneman (2012: 266)



- In conclusion.
- As a filmmaker, one may be filled with **imaginative ideas**, yet the creative process is often **constrained** by established codes, conventions, resources, financial limitations, and external pressures.
- As a researcher, I am particularly intrigued by these constraints, especially in terms of **access to creative opportunities** and the prioritization of certain narratives over others.
- However, despite these limitations, creativity thrives, often, as Rod Stoneman argues, benefiting from uncertainty, chance, and risk (2012).
- In this quote here Stoneman reflects on his time as CEO of the Irish Film Board and as Deputy Commissioning Editor of Channel 4's Independent Film and Video Department.
- “We need to encourage and maximize **the dynamic of the daring**, the **possibilities of the perilous**, in order to enable the realization of new images and sounds that may contribute to social and cultural transformation.”
- Stoneman's observations remain pertinent, highlighting the significant challenges faced by filmmakers, funders, and policymakers who strive to support innovation and diversity in film production.



- Stoneman argues that filmmakers need the freedom to engage in what he terms "**dangerous creation**," embracing **uncertainty** and **risk-taking**—a process that, while often at **odds** with the priorities of funders is **crucial** for fostering imaginative and **radical** filmmaking.
- These dynamics also raise important considerations for educators, particularly in how we **teach** our students to be **radical thinkers** and the **changemakers** of tomorrow.
- As we navigate the current state of permacrisis—an enduring condition that increasingly **threatens** to establish itself as the 'new normal'—we face the risk of **choking creative innovation** and **limiting the diversity of narratives** within film and television.
- For filmmakers striving to **produce** more radical work with the intent to **transform** society, **the landscape** is becoming **increasingly restrictive**, with even festival screenings proving difficult to secure.
- The recurrent narrative that Hollywood is **constantly** on the **brink of collapse** due to external pressures misses the underlying issue: that the persistent adherence to **risk-averse, formulaic storytelling** just **reinforces the status quo**.
- This **entrenchment** of **conventional narrative** structures **stifles** opportunities for new, groundbreaking **voices** and work to **emerge and thrive**.

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