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| **Title of work**  **Exposing the ‘tissue of making’ in fiction filmmaking** |  | **Abstract**  **Following the screening and paper on my short fiction film About the Night (2023) at last year’s festival, this paper offers a discussion of my ongoing analysis of notes and footage gathered during development and pre-production. Drawing on Barbra Bolt’s (2006) concept of “material thinking,” which emphasises the evolving, relational nature of creative practice, I explore how meaning emerges through engagement with materials, tools, and methods.**  **Bolt argues that an overemphasis on finished works can obscure the dynamic processes at the heart of filmmaking. In this context, I examine how barriers to experimentation—both structural and interpersonal—shape the creative process. My filmmaking approach embraces creative friction and compromise, favouring collaboration over confrontation.**  **Reflecting on the complexities of production, I highlight the intuitive, intellectual, and emotional interplay involved in fiction filmmaking. While figures like Eisenstein acknowledged this fusion, its deeper implications remain under-explored in modern filmmaking practice-led research. By sharing insights from my own process, I hope to inspire more filmmakers to critically engage with their methods and contribute to a growing body of knowledge that goes beyond surface-level accounts of production—revealing the nuanced, intellectual, often invisible work of making fiction.** |
| Conference paper |
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| Following the paper and screening of my short fiction film *About the Night* (2023) at last year’s IEFF Conference, this next iteration of my research presents a more in-depth analysis of the production process. Drawing on my experience as an independent filmmaker this paper comes out of a larger practice-led research project around collaborative working processes in fiction filmmaking (for film and research statement see https://www.screenworks.org.uk/archive/volume-15-1/about-the-night).  Firstly, while we are well past needing to justify creative artefacts as legitimate forms of knowledge in the creative disciplines, we are still working out how best to evidence and frame them within a research context particularly within fiction filmmaking. The more urgent question is how we make the creative process more visible as part of a reflexive research journey, so it is recognised not simply as commentary, but as a continuation of the research itself. Influenced by thinkers like Borgdorff (2010)1, Manning, and Massumi (2014)2, I have come to embrace Borgdorff’s idea of ‘unfinished thinking,’ where knowledge emerges through a continual process of ‘thinking in, through and with art’, a notion echoed in Manning and Massumi’s (*ibid.*) conception of ‘thinking-through’ as a potentially radical act.  Those of us who make films and teach understand that filmmaking unfolds within dynamic, collaborative, and often messy environments where insights are generated not only through the artefact, but ‘through and with’ the emotional, intellectual, and relational labour of making. The challenge is capturing the process so that we can gain meaningful insights. Writing, however difficult, has helped me capture and pin down insights that arise long after production ends, as I revisit notes, footage, and reflections, allowing the research to evolve. In this way, the film becomes both the experiment and the evidence, while the reflexive work around it reveals different knowledge not immediately visible in the finished film. To legitimise fiction filmmaking as scholarly research, we must therefore embrace and expose this process: its situatedness, its iterative nature, and the rich entanglement of thinking and doing. We do not need to anchor our films in abstract theory for them to hold research significance; instead, investigating, what Bolt (2006)3 calls the very ‘tissue of making’—the material and collaborative processes of production—can yield rich insights, provided we apply the right frameworks to shape and contextualise that inquiry. It is in the messiness, the openness, the thinking in, though, and with our films that we expose the ‘unfinished thinking’ that holds relevance for others. It is through the insistence on articulation, in whatever form that may take, that fiction film can meaningfully contribute to knowledge.  Using this notion of the “tissue of making,” which emphasises the evolving, relational nature of creative practice, I continually explore how narrative meaning making emerges through collaborative engagement with materials, tools, and methods in the filmmaking process. Here, I want to share some evolving thoughts as I reflexively think on the ‘tissue of making’ drawn from my embedded experience producing and directing *About the Night*, a practice-based project developed with a small crew of professional practitioners and MA 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. However, in this paper, I aim to share insights from my ‘thinking-through’ of the production process, rather than focusing on narrative strategies.    As a critically engaged filmmaker and educator in production practices, one of my initial goals was to explore how creative decisions are made and who gets credited with making 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 having a more distributed conception of creative identity, which fully recognises all film labour as potential collaborators and cultural workers.  The production process is not only complex, and prone to disruption, but also highly precarious for all who dare to participate. Often seen as a form of alchemy—a fusion of innate talent, craft, and serendipity—this research calls for a radical rethink of our approach to both the practice and pedagogy of filmmaking. While this mystique can create intrigue, it ultimately proves unhelpful, perpetuating the 'cult of the director' and overshadowing those collaborative efforts. Since creativity and understanding are deeply intertwined in filmmaking, it's crucial to recognise that the intricate creative and technical decisions involved come with costs, not just in terms of finances or reputation, but emotional as well.  As a director, much like an actor, you carry the story ‘with-in’ you, and being able to communicate its emotional resonance is crucial. The crew, like the cast, become your first audience, and bringing them into the emotional and thematic core of the project is essential. Because *About the Night* did not follow a traditional story arc, I had to be especially mindful of the film’s style and form, which were not immediately evident on the page. My approach was to depict fictional events with minimal manipulation, aiming to foster empathy without imposing emotion. Rather than striving for strict naturalism, I sought to construct an experiential window into a quiet moment, one that carried the aesthetic quality of a stylised memory. The café was deliberately designed and lit to evoke a more fantastical atmosphere, almost painterly in its composition. One key reference in our discussions was Edward Hopper’s *Automat* (1927), which influenced the tone and visual texture of the space. It was essential that given the film’s experimental nature, I needed to ensure that everyone involved understood this vision and shared it. Whether they fully grasped it at the time is hard to say, I’m not sure I entirely did, in hindsight. But what mattered was a shared commitment to a core approach, shaped collectively through the creative and practical challenges of production. Working ‘through and with’ the film and what we made, the research continues to highlight the deeply embedded collaborative nature of film production and the need for its ongoing reconsideration to better understand the complexities of the production context. This project has enabled me to articulate what I once understood only intuitively, making both the film and my discussions valuable for other researchers, and for its pedagogical implications.  Staying true to our intent not to guide audience emotions was challenging, but the sound team, who deeply understood the project, helped keep me aligned. The sound design and musical elements were critical in supporting the film’s experimental nature by enhancing, rather than compensating for, the absence of overt narrative conflict. These elements were carefully crafted to remain subtle and unobtrusive. Despite on-set challenges, such as a persistent oven noise, the acousmatic composer proposed incorporating it into her compositions. At times, I wavered and was tempted to use something more emotionally directive, but the composer reminded me of our guiding principle: not to tell the audience what to feel. This experience highlighted how a 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 came to realise is that, without a specific framework for capturing the process, you are often left piecing it together from notes, interviews, scattered documentation and memory. And without a guiding set of principles to gather material, this results in a fragmented array of resources that can be difficult to work through.    Thinking, through and with this process of making and research I have come to understand that emphasis on the 'creative voice' in filmmaking, reinforces an elitist structure, limiting diverse content creation. The auteur theory promotes the idea that a singular artistic vision defines a film as art, but this is restrictive, relying on problematic criteria for who qualifies. Both Pearlman (2023)4 and Shambu (2023)5 note that this emphasis on the auteur promotes a colonial and Eurocentric approach to production and prioritises individualism and hierarchical control over the collaborative creativity involved in much of filmmaking in a Western context.  This is where the concept of risk becomes a major factor as the ongoing process of refining and reimagining brings untold risk, therefore limiting opportunities even before exploring innovative storytelling. Stoneman states, “We need to encourage and maximise the dynamic of the daring, the possibilities of the perilous, in order to enable the realisation of new images and sounds that may contribute to social and cultural transformation” (2012, p. 266)6. He advocates for "dangerous creation" to foster new, transformative work (ibid.), but this approach often clashes with the priorities of industry and raises questions about the use of ‘creative voice’ within a pedagogical context. This journey revealed to me that filmmaking is risky in so many more ways than I had previously understood. This has important implications for who gets to participate in creative decision-making on a production. Because filmmaking is often perceived as high-risk, financially and logistically, opportunities to lead productions are frequently reserved for those already deemed “tried and tested.” With so much at stake, taking a chance on someone less established or outside the norm can feel too risky. As a result, the same kinds of people are repeatedly entrusted with leadership, limiting diversity and innovation in the field.  Within the continual interplay of thinking and doing, as creative decisions emerge in real time through dynamic collaboration, with a group of creatives actively shaping the story as production unfolds, you gain more insights into the process and therefore understand better. You generate knowledge, as every department, from lighting to costume, contributes in a critically engaged way to the storytelling (I will come back to this in a moment). So, by exposing these layers of complexity and the multitude of creative choices involved, we challenge the enduring notion of filmmaking as a kind of alchemy that stems solely from the director. Instead, by foregrounding the collaborative nature of the process, opening space for a new kind of knowledge, one that is both accessible and valuable to those learning the craft, as well as to researchers examining the process. For example, Pearlman’s film *I Want to Make a Film About Women* (2019)7, along with her article ‘Distributed Authorship,’8 explores this idea in a historical context, highlighting not only the important work of the suppressed revolutionary women filmmakers in the 1920s Soviet Union, but their production process as well.  While this may seem self-evident, there is a notable lack of detailed evidence, from within the process, particularly in fiction filmmaking, that illustrates precisely how such complexity manifests in practice. Potter has written extensively in blogs and interviews about her filmmaking practice. Her SP-ARK archive9, for instance, offers valuable insights into the production of her 1993 film *Orlando*, serving as a rare resource for understanding the creative, practical, and logistical decisions that shaped the film. There are others, like Walter Murch, Roger Deakins and James Ellis Deakins, to name a few, who continue to document their practice, however, there remains a pressing need for a multiplicity of such efforts—archives, reflections, and research projects that can be examined, unpacked, and reinterpreted from multiple perspectives. This is why I advocate for more in-depth research within a scholarly context.  Through my continued analysis, I have also come to recognise an important dimension in the study of production practices: that filmmaking (both fiction and documentary) can and should be understood as an intellectual pursuit. Despite the industrial and hierarchical conditions in which filmmaking often occurs, the constant negotiation and compromise involved in telling stories, whether at scale or not, within fluid and high-pressure environments, reveals filmmaking to be far more than a mechanical or purely technical act. Rather, the creative decisions involved are inherently reflexive, responsive, and intellectually engaged.  It has been 17 years since Caldwell’s study, *Production Culture* in200810, highlighted how the labour of filmmaking is often rendered invisible, subordinated to the myth of the auteur, even though creative input is distributed across departments and roles. He also emphasises the importance of “below-the-line” workers as essential to the creative process and that products are a rich site of cultural meaning. 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.    As I described earlier, making *About the Night* required a cohesive overview of the story, essential for aligning both cast and crew during production. Filmmaking, shaped by constant creative and technical choices, involves constructing fictional worlds through evolving technologies. The challenge is how to document and analyse the ‘tissue of making’, especially when each production is unique and demands continuous decision-making to achieve narrative coherence. Being reflexive about my own process, I found that deep cohesion emerges through collaboration, as crew members respond collectively to inevitable challenges. It is in these moments of shared problem-solving that filmmaking reveals itself as both an intellectual and artistic endeavour. As Atkinson and Kennedy (2017)11 argue, screen production is not merely the realisation of a pre-existing script but a distributed, evolving process that generates new knowledge. While fully capturing the complexity of a production may be unachievable within a single project, a broader body of research over time can offer a more complete picture. A key aim of my work has become to think through a framework for doing so, both for my next project and potentially for others.    Bolt’s (2004)12 thinking, informed by Heidegger, has been particularly useful in highlighting how privileging the finished artwork over the creative process itself limits our understanding of art as a dynamic, evolving practice. Bolt’s 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.” 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. This “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 have called 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.    So, 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 are the limits put on you by the reality of the situation you are in). Again, I want to emphasize that this creativity is not solely the director’s but shared across all creative workers engaging with the script to bring the film to life. Breaking down these dynamics 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 made the most of what I managed to document, but I now recognise that this will need to be a core focus in future projects.  What I came to appreciate on this journey is that creative collaboration, especially under tight budgets and high stakes, relies on constant negotiation between content, creativity, and compromise. And while friction can seem to threaten a production, it can also drive innovation if approached constructively. As already stated, these pressures are not carried by the director alone; decision-making is distributed, making friction a structural feature of filmmaking. Acknowledging this can help shift production cultures toward more inclusive, less adversarial practices. Currently, the industry often privileges dominant personalities, which risks excluding those less inclined toward conflict and narrows whose voices shape meaning on screen.    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 (a topic I explore further in another iteration of this research). Again, we can expose the alchemy of filmmaking by revealing the intricate processes of meaning-making between below-the-line and above-the-line creative workers and this becomes a worthwhile and necessary endeavour. The mystique surrounding the director as the sole author of a film is difficult to justify, as it obscures the critical, evaluative work happening across all departments. This is not to diminish the director’s role as creative lead, often deeply embedded in the project, as I was, but rather to acknowledge that filmmaking is always a collective endeavour, and greater recognition of this would more accurately reflect its realities.  Through reflexively interrogating the creative decision-making on this film, I have come to appreciate and 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, this highlights the importance of continued research, both mine and that of others, to illuminate the many facets of creative and collaborative production practices. Each piece of research will inevitably remain a form of ‘unfinished thinking,’ given the messy, dynamic nature of filmmaking. But by thinking in, through, and with our films, we can begin to produce the kind of innovative and radical work that Stoneman calls for. | | |
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| Bio  I am an independent filmmaker and experienced academic. I have produced and directed short fiction films which have been showcased on UK television and at prestigious festivals including Edinburgh, Brooklyn, and Cork. My latest work, *About the Night*, has garnered acclaim, wining Best Story at *The British International Film Festival* and receiving nominations for Best Narrative Short Film at the *Miami Women Film Festival*, *New York Arthouse* Film Festival, and nominated for Best Female Director, European Short Awards. Mostly recently, the film was nominated for Best Screen-based Practice Research (short) at the BAFTSS Conference and received an honourable mention. |  | A person smiling at the camera  AI-generated content may be incorrect. |