

Writing and Improvising the Digital Essay Film: the Boot Cake



Kathryn Millard
Macquarie University
kmillard@scmp.mq.edu.au

Abstract

This paper reflects on the process of writing and producing the author's feature-length non-fiction film about Chaplin imitators in India: *The Boot Cake*. (www.thebootcake.com) It aims to contribute to debate about 1. innovative screen production processes and aesthetics, and 2. the value accorded screen practice research in universities. *Writing and Improvising the Digital Essay Film* investigates how semi-structured improvisations and collaborations might provide models for the film making process in a digital environment.

Further, it reflects on screen production teams as innovative organisational and research units. The paper draws on the author's body of practice-led research in screen media, on theories of non-fiction film forms, on the essay genre, and on the systems theory of creativity.

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Introduction

Traditional models of scholarship often assume that research is content which can then be 'written up' within standard academic conventions. Modes of writing or presentation are expected to fit these conventions, which include the impersonal, passive voice, specialist language, jargon, and the footnoting and referencing of sources (with some room for adjustment to accommodate the requirements of specific disciplines). In this model, screen media productions are seen as primarily offering an additional method of disseminating the research results to a wider audience. As someone whose research lies primarily in the practice-led area however, I consider screen writing and production as integral to my research, as my research, rather than simply a means of dissemination.

Screen theorist Jon Dovey suggests that the four key areas of practice-led research in the screen media arts are:

1. Platform/technology research.
2. Media on media research: for example, films like *Outfoxed* or *Manufacturing Consent*.
3. Aesthetic research: 'Stylistic innovation, new ways of using screen grammar, finding new means to say things'.
4. Process-based research: 'Work in which the production methods, ethics, relationships, ways of generating material, research could be innovative.'¹

My research with *The Boot Cake* lies in the latter two areas, that is, aesthetic research and process-based research. The following are some of the research questions that have evolved over the several years I have worked on this particular project:

Does the essay film have a particular affinity with low budget, digital film making?

How might current research on improvisation and collaboration inform the writing and production of a digital documentary?

How could we develop crew structures and creative teams suited to more fluid ways of working on future low budget, non-fiction, fiction, or hybrid film projects?

In this article, I am going to discuss how and why I reframed a large-scale, expensive survey documentary into a low-budget essay film. The original idea (*Here Comes Charlie*) was to incorporate contemporary stories and a wealth of archival footage to investigate ways in which Charlie Chaplin's Tramp has been reconfigured and translated to become a local figure in many countries around the globe, since his first appearance on screen in 1914. From Buenos Aires to Bollywood, the twentieth century's favourite comedian bulldozed a path that today we would call globalisation. The initial treatment traced his tracks across a variety of regional contexts, illuminating the ways in which popular culture adapts itself to, as well as transforms, local visual traditions. The completed film, *The Boot Cake*, is a more intimate, author-driven film focusing on the Charlie Circle of Adipur in north-west India, and the travails of two Mumbai-based imitators. In other words, a film that explores the universal appeal of the Tramp through the prism of Chaplin imitators in India.² A significant part of this re-framing of the project involved exploring innovative filmmaking methodologies best suited to the available resources and personnel.

Initially, the story of Doctor Aswani and the Charlie Circle of Adipur was intended to be one of a number of stories shot in India, Japan, Brazil, France and Australia; stories based on an extensive research and scoping phase. When I reviewed the footage however, it was clear that it could sustain more screen time than first planned. Soon after our Adipur shoot, which was funded through the Australian Film Commission's Time-Critical Shooting Strand, editor, Andrew Soo and I created a four-minute teaser from this footage and my archival research. I attended international documentary markets and used the teaser and a written proposal to secure pre-sale offers in Europe and a distribution advance. We appeared to be well on track to make the proposed film.

Or so I thought.

As it turned out, I was unable to keep an Australian broadcaster involved for long enough to complete financing, and after several years' work and a great deal of international interest, the project appeared to be unmakeable. One option would have been to continue trying to finance the project for another year or two, in the hope that policies or personnel might change. Instead, rather than spend any more time financing, I decided to construct a new low-budget project around the footage that we had already shot. The project didn't initially seem an obvious one for a low budget treatment; not only because of the costs of shooting overseas, but also because of the complex copyright and legal issues surrounding the whole phenomenon of Chaplin imitators. Truth be told, the prospect of being in development for yet another year or two or five was distinctly unappealing. Too often I think, film projects lose momentum and energy through overly drawn out development processes. Almost inevitably, they lose what social psychologist Abraham Maslow called in his diaries that vital quality of 'aliveness'.³

Alongside this I had also devoted a considerable amount of time trying to get my film making and academic careers to mesh. Two of the major film projects I had completed while an academic (the short feature *Parklands* and the feature *Travelling Light*)⁴ involved years of draft-by-draft funding and stop-start development in order to attract extremely competitive script development and production funds. The insights I gained through this practice-led research, into cinematic scriptwriting or colour, for example, contributed to academic articles, conference presentations and, of course, teaching programs and postgraduate supervisions. Yet neither film had any research or development funds from university grant schemes and moreover, I took unpaid leave in order to direct them. On the Chaplin imitators documentary, I hoped to work differently.

Since my work on the internationalisation of Chaplin's Tramp was acknowledged as an original and significant contribution to scholarship across the disciplines of screen history, ethnography, visual culture and the performing arts, I aimed to obtain some support for the film through academic channels. Needless to say, this proved extremely difficult. To begin with I was able to carry out much of the overseas archival research by delivering papers at academic conferences in targeted countries. This levered airfares from divisional or departmental schemes. For me however, attempting to combine academic and film and arts sources of funding made already complex and time-consuming funding processes and applications even

more complex and time-consuming; seriously impinging on the time available to devote to writing, producing and directing innovative screen productions.

There were also times when I wondered about the wisdom of seeking higher education sector grants, since researchers in my field are often expected to produce a range of outputs that include scholarly articles and books as well as their films or digital media productions. Should I promise to deliver all the outputs that I knew to be necessary in order to secure university funding? While I understand the need to produce articles that contextualise one's production work, and to differentiate between professional practice on the one hand, and the production of knowledge through practice-led research on the other, for me there are still questions about how much scholarly writing one can reasonably produce at the same time. I would also question whether words are the only way of expressing ideas in a culture that is becoming more and more visually literate? After all, as cultural commentator and copyright activist Lawrence Lessing notes, our understanding of what it means to write is shifting in a digital era: '*Writing with text is just one way to write ... The more interesting ways are increasingly to use images and sound and video to express ideas.*'⁵ I wonder too, whether the authors of scholarly monographs or theoretical texts in our disciplines are expected to produce in addition, significant media productions that attract commercial distributors? (The requirements for a J1 Major Creative Work in DEST's current categories of publication outputs.)⁶

No doubt, as researchers in the creative arts (or scholar/practitioners as they are sometimes called in the United States), we will find various solutions to these problems. There is no 'one size fits all' solution to these dilemmas and I think we should resist prescriptive formulae. A popular model and one frequently proposed is that practice-led researchers should form teams with theorists working on similar themes. From my point of view, the problem with this strategy is that it can fail to acknowledge practice-led research as a mode of investigation rather than simply a method of disseminating research results. It can promote the rather outmoded notion that theorists are 'ideas' people and creative artists are 'hands-on' people. It also does not acknowledge that researchers who use similar research methodologies may sometimes work together more effectively than groups organised around broad research topics.

The issues are complex; emergent collaborative groupings require the careful balancing of sufficient diversity with a shared sense of purpose. To give but one example.

The possibilities are many; sometimes people might decide to work within university-based research teams with a spread of skills, sometimes to continue to work with collaborators and partner investigators in the creative industries. The precise solutions will depend on a number of variables, including the research questions under investigation, the resources required, the track records and specific interests of the individuals, and the institutional contexts within which they are working.

Back to *The Boot Cake*. At some point I decided to focus the project on what was achievable, rather than what was not. How could I make a virtue of necessity? After all, as Adrian Martin reminds us in his article about low budget filmmaking, New Wave film-makers often shaped projects around both ideas and the resources that they could access: ‘Jean-Pierre Gorin, Godard’s collaborator during the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, recently described Godard’s creative process as “working out what film he could make with this much money, this many friends, and a few interiors” (2005). The Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez put it even better: “Give me two photos, music, and a moviola, and I’ll give you a movie” (2004).’⁷

What did I have?

I had ten hours of footage from *Adipur* that I was confident could form the basis of a documentary. There were gaps, of course, because it had been intended to form only part of the story.

I had an essay that I had written about our experiences filming in India called *The Boot Cake* that I thought I could adapt to the essay film format.

As a screen media academic, I had access to a prosumer HD camera, some technical support, and an editing room on campus. (Well, actually something more like a broom cupboard with some equipment. Since there was not enough space

for the editor and I to close the door with both of us inside, it is perhaps fortunate that we were to develop such a strong professional relationship.)

I had collaborators who were committed to the project and keen to be involved.

I had some long-service leave that I could cash in.

So this time I abandoned my more usual process of discrete scripting and production phases and decided to work in a more fluid and interactive way, moving back and forth between editing, shooting and writing. I began by sketching out a shape for the new film. I would need to travel to Mumbai to re-trace my steps as I found out how to make a boot-shaped cake that would survive Adipur's near fifty-degree heat. While there, I would also shoot footage with two Chaplin imitators: Viswajeet, a young street performer, and Prevan, who had been playing Charlie at community centres, shopping malls and Bollywood parties for more than twenty five years. Once I decided to pursue the film as a low budget, authored documentary (working with a small team of DOP, Sound Recordist, Editor, Composer and Sound Designer) I relished the freedom that came as a result of not having broadcasters or funding bodies attached. I no longer needed to consult with commissioning editors or project officers, no longer needed to produce endless drafts and treatments. While—quite literally—running back and forth between our editing cupboard and lecture theatres or tutorial rooms was far from ideal, I was no longer spending so much time revising proposals, budgets and schedules. It was liberating. My collaborators too, enjoyed this freedom that came from our new way of working. Offers of assistance poured in, and a real community spirit developed around the film.

Our small team all took on tasks that would be outside their usual job descriptions. Social psychologist and creativity theorist Keith Sawyer suggests that a useful technique when aiming for innovation is to define jobs as broadly as possible: 'When people have a broader range of skills, new connections and greater communication are possible. The more jobs are formalised, the less likely innovation becomes.'⁸

To fast forward a bit. Once we had the new footage, editor Andrew Soo and I began re-shaping it. Along the way, we incorporated some of the Chaplin imitator archival material, and Sydney-based DOP Steve McDonald, helped me shoot some mock-archival footage to save stock fees. The multi-stranded stories that I had previously scripted and made helped provide models for *The Boot Cake's* structure. We had to take breaks from editing at various times: because of other work commitments; because we needed to get more material translated from Hindi to English; because we needed to shoot additional images in Sydney or research archival images of cakes. It was liberating to feed this new footage into the edit along the way. Plus, as film editor Walter Murch suggests: 'Digital technologies naturally tend to integrate with one another.'⁹ In our era of digital cinema, which tends to collapse previously discrete stages of pre-production, production and post-production into one more fluid stage, images can be re-worked to a much greater degree. There were always more pathways through the material, or more refinements to explore.

The end result was influenced by ideas about digital culture and the remix. Silent film comedies, black and white, and animations are part of the film's mix, a kind of pulse running through the contemporary footage.¹⁰ Mirror images, doubles, silhouettes and shadows are some of its key visual motifs. *The Boot Cake* also incorporates inter-titles to introduce characters and assist the story-telling. They are intended as both a reference to silent cinema and to the works of filmmakers like Errol Morris and Jay Rosenblatt, whose documentaries are often organised around chapter headings. Although the end result incorporates observational footage, re-enactments and archival footage, and borrows from the ethnographic film as well as the film essay, the cinematic essay was foremost in my mind when I began re-shaping footage intended for *Here Comes Charlie into The Boot Cake*. In part because it was a form I had long been interested in. My short feature *Parklands*, for example, interwove narrative strands from the thriller, the family drama, the memory film and archival footage to investigate 'essayistic fiction'.

Opportunities to access resources for essay films are unfortunately few and far between in the Australian screen funding landscape. But it is the form's latitude to explore ideas that I find particularly appealing. After all, cinema with its combination of images, sounds and music is a medium particularly suited to engaging both the senses and the mind. For Paul Arthur, essay films 'are the product of a twisting a-priori unmappable mental journey. They unfold through skeins of accumulation, one thing after another, allowing for sudden excursions, unexpected epiphanies, and reflective pauses.'¹¹ Some critics argue that some of the most distinctive film works produced with new digital technologies such as mass market cameras, have been authored documentaries and essay films, rather than the over-publicised Dogma catalogue. Joseph Epstein famously described the print essay as 'taking a line for a walk.'¹² Perhaps the cinematic equivalent is taking an image for a walk?

Along with our initial DOP Himman Dhimaji, composer Elena Kats-Chernin was one of the first team members on the project. We had viewed and discussed the footage and potential approaches to the *Here Comes Charlie* soundtrack at considerable length. When that film morphed into *The Boot Cake* we had to re-consider how to create our planned 'bent silent film soundtrack' with minimal resources, and Elena came up with the idea of a semi-improvised soundtrack. Although our semi-improvised score initially came about as a way of dealing with a low budget, it quickly became a preferred way of working. Once the picture edit was locked off, Elena began turning abstract ideas into compositions. We then recorded the music with an improvising ensemble together with Elena as pianist and musical director. The music (far more than the approximately thirty minutes we required) was recorded in one marathon twelve-hour session. Sound designer Andrew Plain and I then placed the music more precisely in the cut. The idea was that the music would lead the sound design process. On reflection, I can now see that the discussions the team had about a semi-improvised score fed into other parts of the production process, and could provide a model for working on future projects.

A seminal study of film production crews as work organisation units notes that '*because film units are temporary creative systems, they have much in common with technical or scientific projects' consulting teams, task forces and other short term task groups.*'¹³ Its authors propose that managers look to film productions to learn how to organise groups who come

together to develop ideas, plans, products or services. There is a high correlation, they suggest, between *temporariness* and creativity, and between *permanence* and routine.

Keith Sawyer notes that improvisational theatre groups who do 'long form improvisation' (i.e. thirty to sixty minute performances) almost always prepare a loose structure in advance. '*Good jazz improvisers have years of experience ... they build a repertoire of phrases, overall forms, and memories of other musicians' famous solos and recordings. When improvising, they draw on this material.*'¹⁴ In other words, improvising musicians do not necessarily draw directly on these phrases and forms. Instead, they modify and embellish them to suit the demands of specific situations. I consider this similar to the ways in which experienced writers, directors, cinematographers, editors and composers can work together when they are given the freedom and support to do so. Why is it then that in the film and television industries, it is usually only actors who are permitted to improvise? Research conducted in the IT industries as multimedia was emerging, suggests that successful innovators build on 'limited structures'. That is, 'the critical balance for innovation is at the edge of chaos; not too rigid to prevent emergent innovation, but not too loose to result in total chaos.'¹⁵ For me, the production of *The Boot Cake* has provided an opportunity to test not only aesthetic forms that may be suited to low budget digital cinema, but also to explore new collaborative models.

¹ Dovey, J. (2007), 'Screen Media Practice Research and Peer Review', p. 66 *Journal of Media Practice* 8: 1, pp. 63–70

² Millard, Kathryn Writer/Producer/Director/Narrator '*The Boot Cake*' 74 mins, HD Ronin Films, Australia, 2009 www.thebootcake.com

³ Lowrey, Richard Ed. '*The Journals of Abraham Maslow*' (Lewis, USA, 1982) p.37

⁴ Millard, Kathryn Writer/Director *Travelling Light*, Drama 84mins, 2003 and Writer/Director *Parklands*, Drama, 53 mins, 1996. (Magna Pacific and Dendy Films, DVD, Australia, 2003)

⁵ Koman, R. (2005) "Remixing Culture: An Interview with Lawrence Lessig", O'Reilly Network, <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/policy/2005/02/24/lessig.html>, accessed October 23, 2006

⁶ http://www.research.mq.edu.au/data_and_reporting/documents/All-Publications-Categories-Information.pdf This document lists the weightings that DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training) accords various research publication outputs. For example, monographs (A1) are valued at 5.0, (B1) book chapters at 1.0, (C1) refereed journal articles at 1.0, refereed conference papers (E1) at 1.00, major creative works (J1) at 1.0. Please refer to the detailed criteria for each category within the document above. This paper, for example, is weighted at 1.00, as is the 75 minute documentary *The Boot Cake* it discusses. My previous feature films *Travelling Light* (2003) and *Parklands* (1996) were also each valued at 1.0 DEST point. In recognition of the under-valuing of research outputs in the Creative Arts area, Macquarie University includes 'quality J1s' within its 'research active' criteria. This is intended to allow staff to claim peer-review equivalency research outputs in the creative arts discipline as research activity while still making a distinction between 'professional practice' and 'research'. A number of other Australian universities now include 'J1s, J2s and J3s' within their 'research active criteria for staff. In some cases, with no reference to the DEST points system. Monash University, for example, includes J1s, J2s and J3s within its definition of 'research expectations' but does not weight any of the research outputs. Other than monographs which are worth 5 other research outputs.

⁷ Martin, Adrian 'Kind of a Revolution and Kind of Not: Digital Low-Budget Cinema in Australia Today' in Millard, Kathryn Ed. *Cinematic Scriptwriting*, Special Issue of *Scan* Vol 3 No. 2 October 2006 http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=76

⁸ Sawyer, Keith '*Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*' p. 171 (Basic Books, USA, 2007)

⁹ Murch, Walter 'A Digital Cinema of the Mind? Could Be' *NY Times* May 2nd 1999 <http://filmsound.org/murch/murch.htm>

¹⁰ I was fortunate to receive a Macquarie University Research Development Grant for a project about the essay film while we were editing. It was the third consecutive year that I had applied with this project. The MQRDG provided additional facilities and research associates. These funds assisted me in getting *The Boot Cake* to fine cut. The film then attracted post-production funding from the Australian Film Finance Corporation's Special Documentary Fund

which is aimed at supporting low budget innovative documentaries without broadcaster attachments. Up to 5 projects are funded each year through this scheme. The new screen industry agency Screen Australia now administers the Special Documentary Fund.

¹¹ Arthur, Paul 'A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965' p. 68 (University of Minnesota Press, USA, 2005)

¹² Epstein, Joseph 'A Line for a Walk: Familiar Essays' (Norton, USA, 1992)

¹³ Morley, Eileen and Silver, Andrew 'A Film Director's Approach to Managing Creativity' March-April 1977 Harvard Business Review on Breakthrough Thinking' p. 89 (Harvard Business Review, USA, 1999)

¹⁴ Sawyer, Keith 'Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration' p. 170 (Basic Books, USA, 2007)

Biography

Kathryn Millard is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Music and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University. Her previous films as Writer/Director include the features Travelling Light, the one hour drama Parklands and the documentary Light Years. Kathryn publishes on film, screenwriting, creativity and collaboration.

The trailer for The Boot Cake can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

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School of Communication, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Room CB 10.05.111, University of Technology Sydney,
Broadway NSW 2007 Australia