Researching 'The Shoot Out Filmmaking Festival' by Targeting Creativity

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Abstract

The Shoot Out 24 Hour Filmmaking Festival began in Newcastle in 1999 and ran annually until 2008. The premise was that films had to be made in a 24-hour period and to authenticate the festival timeframe each film included specific items filmed at local sites. In some years the festival attracted up to 180 film crews, who annually swarmed the streets of Newcastle to film in specified locations, in a linear order to comply with another rule: 'in-camera' editing.

The Shoot Out rules definitely challenged the filmmakers' creativity, and this article explores how creativity evolved in the films over a ten-year period.

Some of *The Shoot Out* films went on to gain industry recognition outside the context of this filmmaking festival. For example, *Thursday* (2005) gained selection at fourteen national and international festivals including the *International Youth Film Festival* in Austria. Outcomes like this exceeded The Shoot Out festival directors' expectations and made them recognise that the festival's rules and strict criteria that had been assumed to be constraining creativity were actually enabling it to produce films that connected strongly with a broad audience. Using creativity theories (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, Kerrigan 2013) this paper explores how *The Shoot Out* rules shaped the films that were produced and how those 'creative' production approaches were subsequently adopted and used by practitioners. Filmmakers such as Jason Van Genderen illustrate creativity in filmmaking. As a young filmmaker he first entered *The Shoot Out* in 2003 and is now renowned for being 'something of a poster boy for how to make beautiful short films on a limited budget, using unconventional techniques' (Tropfest 2013).

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Introduction

In Newcastle, when *The Shoot Out* filmmaking competitors registered at 9pm on the Friday evening of the festival they received a list of items to include and the 24 hours to make their films began. The preliminary judging process to select the top ten films began 24 hours later and took place through the night. The ten selected films were publicly screened on the Sunday night where an industry judging panel determined the winner and category awards. *The Shoot Out* was unlike traditional film screening festivals, given its emphasis on filmmaking using in-camera editing techniques and a list of specified items to verify the films were made within the 24 hour competition time. *The Shoot Out Festival* has also taken place in other places, such as Geelong (Victoria), Toowoomba (Queensland) and in New Zealand, and it continues to be run in Colorado in the United States.

In 1999, the year of the event's inception, there were a number of short film festivals designed to showcase new work nationally and internationally, however access to equipment required for video production was cost prohibitive to young filmmakers. *The Shoot Out* was developed in an attempt to create a level playing field, using its rules to remove financial barriers to the production process. The rules allowed filmmakers of all levels to compete, while at the same time challenging their creativity. At its heart, the event was focused on using video as a medium for effective storytelling, with less weight given to the seamless technical expectations of the film and television industry.

The Shoot Out presents a rich context for post-graduate research and, as one of the festival directors, I am in a unique position to reflectively analyse the creative implications of the festivals' rules on the film festival entrants. My research is being conducted in stages, the first presented here and focussing on how *The Shoot Out* 24 hour filmmaking rules shaped the films that were produced, and how those 'creative' production approaches were adopted by filmmakers in subsequent years. The second stage of the research will involve interviews with The Shoot Out filmmakers to identify their creative practices and production processes, and how they negotiated and complied with The Shoot Out rules. The final stage of the research will look at the role of *The Shoot Out* in nurturing filmmakers for the industry. In stage one, presented here, reflective research draws on my experiences as a founding director of *The Shoot Out 24 Hour Filmmaking Festival* and observations of how the festival developed its own creative system.

Methodology

As an insider for a decade, involved in the design and running of the *The Shoot Out* competition, I am in a unique position to undertake this ethnographic research. As Robson states, ethnography 'requires you to gain an insider's perspective... For traditional ethnographies the time taken to collect data is extensive, often extending over years' (Robson 2011, 143). This methodology allows me to be reflectively inside the research, drawing on over 10 years' experience running the event. In the future, during the second stage of the project, interview methods will be used to capture the authentic data and verify the filmmakers' own approaches to *The Shoot Out*.

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology where researchers 'assume the social interaction is complex and that they will uncover some of the complexity' (Glesne and Peshkin 1992, 7). Qualitative research focuses on the detail, delving into the heart of what is occurring for the participants.

The creative process of filmmaking is extremely complex. To uncover a deep understanding of what is occurring for one filmmaker's process can be much more revealing to a researcher than a large number of casual or superficial observations. If that understanding could then be found to exist, and apply, for one or two additional filmmakers it could become a valuable insight into the process (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight 2010; Geertz 1973).

Although objectivity in research is desirable to avoid skewing research data, an ethnographic study accepts that qualitative researchers 'showcase a variety of meanings and truths, and draw on a belief in and support of a researcher's active role in the research process' (Brennen 2012, 4). In achieving this it is accepted that I have some subjectivity and that this can, when transparent, more fully inform the research. 'The concern with researcher objectivity is replaced by a focus on the impact of subjectivity on the research process' (Glesne and Peshkin 1992, 6). My subjectivity in this instance will help in understanding the filmmakers' process from their perspective and to have more insight into their creative domain.

Literature Review

Research relevant to this project falls into three broad areas: research on film production practices, cultural film festivals and creativity. Film practitioner or 'how to' guides for filmmaking provide practical understanding of the filmmaking process (Mollison 2003; Hurbis-Cherrier 2007; Rabiger 2009; Gaskell 2004; Thurlow and Thurlow 2013). Online podcasts and tutorials (ABC 2013; Adobe 2014) offer practical filmmaking tips and techniques on production practices.

Film production research practices (Caldwell 2008; Ortner 2009; Greenhalge 2010) provide a broader context about filmmaking in the industry. Works such as Cohen et al. are, however, more central to the argument being made here because they recognize the different types of production processes being used to make documentary, animation and experimental films (Cohen, Salazar, and Barkat 2009).

Adding to the literature informing this study is the literature on cultural film festivals, focused mainly on the marketing aspects that describe film festivals within a commercial framework. Turan (2003) looks at international film festivals as businesses, geopolitics and aesthetics while Dayan (2000) presents case studies of the experiences of directors, sales

agents, audiences and journalists. Valck recognizes that film festivals 'accommodate culture and commerce, experimentation and entertainment, geopolitical interests and global funding' (2007, 16). This growing global film 'festival phenomenon is sweepingly professionalized and institutionalized' (Valck 2007, 20) and, as Turan points out, 'no one seems to be exactly sure how many [film] festivals there are in the world' (2003, 2). In Australia, Gibson et al. analyse the ARC Festivals Project Database 2007 and find that film festivals make up 26.9% of all arts festivals in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania (2010, 285) but details specific to short film festivals have been impossible to obtain.

Australian filmmakers can access film festival information from the Screen Australia website (n.d.), The Production Book (Intermedia Group 2014) and through blog sites for Film Festivals Australia (2014) and Australian Short Films (2014). However, in the academic arena this landscape of short film festivals has not been rigorously explored, except for examples of festivals with specific agendas such as the Gamson (1996) analysis of lesbian and gay film festivals in New York. So, even though there is a proliferation of film festivals that service both professional and amateur criteria as well as feature and short film festivals, it has still been difficult to locate research that focuses specifically on those film festivals that incorporate filmmaking as part of their competition rules and conditions. The two key examples to be discussed in more detail because of their relevance to this study are *Tropfest* and *White Gloves*.

Sydney's *Tropfest* started 21 years ago. It now runs in nine countries and claims to be 'the world's largest short film festival' (Tropfest 2012). *Tropfest* films are made specifically to comply with the *Tropfest* criteria and each year every film must feature a particular item (e.g. in 2014 it was a mirror). The other relevant example is *White Gloves Festival* (Melbourne) which began 25 years ago and also included an object when challenging filmmakers to shoot using a single roll of Super 8 film, with no editing.

The Shoot Out started in 1999 and used similar competition strategies to *Tropfest* and *White Gloves*, building on these strategies and including a tight production time restraint of 24 hours. Following on, in 2001 came *The 48 Hour Film Project* and its rules require filmmakers to make a film in 48 hours and to include specified elements, such as lines of dialogue, characters, and props. Although all of these festivals have press articles and web sites promoting their events (Tropfest 2014; The 48 Hour Film Project; n.d.; Tiley 2014), relevant academic literature is scarce, with the exception of a recent study by Mercier and Wilson looking at participant motivation in *The 48 Hour Film Project* in New Zealand (2013).

There are also professional examples of creating films that impose limitations on a filmmaker's context such as the *Dogme95* movement, dealing with feature film creation. The *Dogme95* movement was heralded as the 'ultimate democratization of the cinema... For the first time, anyone can make movies' (Von Trier and Vinterberg 1995). Simons says, 'Dogme was seen as an invitation to make use of new portable, user-friendly and relatively inexpensive digital video technologies to film everyday reality' (2007, 14).

By imposing rules on the creative work (such as the camera must be hand-held and there should be no additional lighting), filmmakers are forced to go back to the basics of filmmaking. Although the rules of *Dogme95* were different to those of *The Shoot Out*, they too imposed an aesthetic on the works. The rules and conditions 'did not address the problems the film dealt with, but defined the constraints von Trier set for himself on each film production' (Simons 2007, 8). Kelly further explains that *Dogme95* is 'about setting some rules and some limitations, and these can be any. The idea is simply to gain creativity through self imposition' (2011, 80).

In his documentary *The Five Obstructions* (2003) Lars von Trier further explores the idea of rules constraining and enabling creativity, challenging Jorgen Leth to remake his film *The Perfect Human* (1967) five times with different obstructions or obstacles each time. The von Trier project has been used as a case study to explore strict scaffolding of the filmmaking process and its effects on creativity (Philipsen 2010).

Research into filmmaking that applies creativity theories to practices (Redvall 2012; Kerrigan 2013; McIntyre 2012) is an emerging area of scholarly research. This approach rejects the early romantic ideals of the individual's 'inner muse' or 'divine inspiration' (McIntyre 2012). Creativity research now focuses not on an extraordinary product, but rather on a creative process in the context of its social and historical environment (Sawyer 2006, McIntyre 2012, Bailin 1988). As Csikszentmihalyi states, 'creativity does not exist in a vacuum' (1999, 315). This contemporary attitude includes thinking of creativity within a systems model that 'brings the practitioners and their choices into focus without forgetting that what is at stake... is not just any product, but a very specific text meeting very specific demands from experts in the field, influenced by the existing works and ideas of best practice in a domain' (Redvall 2012, 69).

Csikszentmihalyi's creative systems model argues that 'creativity is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains and fields interact' (1999, 314). Kerrigan (2013) revises this model, suggesting 'creative

practices' occur at this intersection (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Revised Systems Model of Creativity Incorporating Creative Practice   (Kerrigan 2013, 114)

The Shoot Out festival can be aligned with the components of the revised systems model (2013), where *The Shoot Out* festival represents a creative context. *The Shoot Out* culture provides the creative domain that is all the filmmakers, judges and audience who contribute to, and participate in, the festival. Inside the domain exists a series of filmmaking rules and conditions in which the filmmakers (who are agents) draw on their own idiosyncratic filmmaking backgrounds to create a film. If the film is deemed to be creative it will 'stimulate novelty' and be accepted by the festival judging process, which aligns with the field. *The Shoot Out* judges (or the field) have the power to select the most promising examples of 'novelty' which become the top ten *Shoot Out* films. The top ten films are publically screened at the end of each *Shoot Out* festival and are later released on DVD. Domain access to each year's top ten films gives future *Shoot Out* contestants the opportunity to re-use novel approaches, be they film production techniques or narrative structures, in future projects. Participation in *The Shoot Out* creative system requires filmmaking agents to identify novelty and transmit novelty in their own work. Or, as Csikszentmihalyi argues,

To function well within the creative system, one must internalize the rules of the domain and the opinions of the field, so that one can choose the most promising ideas to work on, and do so in a way that will be acceptable to one's peers. (1999, 332)

The domain for *The Shoot Out* is unique in that it encompasses traditional filmmaking but also draws on the specificities of *The Shoot Out*, which are laid out in its rules and conditions. Bailin argues that 'there is no real discontinuity between achieving highly within the rules of a discipline and achieving highly when it entails going beyond or changing some rules' (1988, 96).

Reflections on The Shoot Out

The Shoot Out ran in Newcastle for a decade, with over 100 teams per year submitting films for judging. At least half the teams competing came from the Sydney metropolitan area, with some teams travelling from as far as Melbourne, Canberra and New Zealand. Of the completed films each year there were ten selected by the preliminary judging panel to be screened on the Sunday night of the festival. It is in these top ten *Shoot Out* films that evidence of creative practice within *The Shoot Out* context can be confirmed.

Originally *The Shoot Out 24 Hour Filmmaking Festival* was strongly aligned with the dichotomy of the professional film and television industry and amateur video enthusiasts. Young filmmakers felt that, even in festivals designed to encourage and screen their work, they needed access to money and equipment to be successful. Hence creating a level playing field was one of the main goals of *The Shoot Out*. This was achieved through the competition rules, which were created to reduce the emphasis on technical quality and permit even amateur filmmakers to demonstrate creative filmmaking skills using whatever equipment was at hand.

As Bordwell argues, rules actually enable creative choices, in that 'the artist's choices are informed and constrained by the rules and roles of artmaking. The artistic institution [in this case the festival] formulates tasks, puts problems on the agenda, and rewards effective solutions' (1997, 151).

With less emphasis on the seamless technical expectations of the film and television industry, the focus of the event was to encourage story telling using video as a medium. The judges were required to recognise how effectively the films had been made within the rules.

The Shoot Out Rules were as follows:

- Strictly 24 hours to make the film
- In-camera editing only

As defined by *The Shoot Out* web site, in-camera editing meant films, 'cannot be edited by using an editing suite or by connecting several cameras or by using a computer or any other technology other than the one camera used to shoot the film' (24 Hour Events 2008).

- Permitted to use a dubbing process to add music or sound track
- Include five items from a list of 10 or more (mostly specific objects at locations).

To ensure equity, each year the list of items, from which five were to appear in the film, changed. The items list could include everyday objects, actors and phrases but was mostly physical items that could be found at specific Newcastle locations. It was handed out at 9pm at the beginning of the 24 filmmaking hours and it presented all the filmmakers with production challenges that were designed to ensure the films were both actually filmed within the 24 hours and filmed on location in Newcastle, fulfilling the festival's brief to promote the city. An example of the sort of item that could be selected as one of the five necessary items ensuring the films were shot in and around Newcastle is a red park bench that was on the corner of King and Union Streets.

By insisting that all short films were made using only the camera functions to achieve in-camera editing, the need for expensive editing suites was removed. Furthermore, the 24 hour time limit reduced the ability of teams to access professional facilities and help from production houses, generally located in Sydney or indeed interstate, rather than the regional city of Newcastle. Filmmakers had to focus their efforts on creating a film within the festival's constraints, including the challenge of using a linear style of shooting. In 1999, *The Shoot Out* participants were using videotape

cameras ranging from professional Digibeta cameras, to semi-professional Mini DV and amateur VHS cameras. This allowed all levels of filmmakers, from the professional to the amateur, to participate in the festival.

When the festival first started, the three festival directors felt that the resultant films would be at best, good amateur enthusiast films, something akin to the television program *Australia's Funniest Home Video Show* (Nine Network 1991). Instead, the filmmakers embraced the challenges created by the time restraint and the inclusion of the items list, and discovered ways to work within these rules and push the boundaries of creativity. The quality of the works exceeded expectation and were often recognized by industry, going on to win awards in more traditional film festivals. One such example of this was the film *Thursday* (2005), written produced and directed by Marissa Martin and Mathew Fallon, made under *The Shoot Out* rules and conditions went on to be awarded prizes and gain selection at fourteen national and international festivals including the *International Youth Film Festival* in Austria.

The festival directors had never envisaged techniques such as claymation would be viable options but one entrant, intent on creating a claymation included a photograph of each of the five required items/locations as backdrops in their film to comply with the rules. The resultant film *Bog in the City* (1999) was one of the top ten films that year because it was embraced by *The Shoot Out* judges who, according to the systems model, are part of the field of experts. As such this field of experts are entitled to judge all novel approaches employed in *The Shoot Out* context, and hence *Bog in the City* (1999) was identified as 'stimulating novelty'. This example supports Csikszentmihalyi's claim that,

> For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain, the   variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain. (1999, 315)

In following years the method of including photographs of the items in the film became a 'novel' approach that filmmakers used to comply with *The Shoot Out's* rules. This novel approach is an example of how *The Shoot Out* field was empowered to select a novel technique, which was later recognised by the domain as being a unique and compliant creative approach. Subsequent filmmakers were able to reuse this new contribution to the domain by employing the same 'novel' photographic technique in their own films. Hence the filmmaking agents were transmitting novelty between the domain and themselves by photographing locations and including them in their films. Thus the festival started to develop its own unique domain or cultural approach to short film production specific to *The Shoot Out's* creativity system. As Csikszentmihalyi argues,

> Creativity is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain or establish a new domain. (1988, 28)

Another example of how *The Shoot Out* filmmakers changed the domain occurred in 2001, two years into the Festival's ten-year lifespan, when a team took a novel approach to the in-camera editing rule by using a non-linear filming technique to create Bon Voyage (2001). Utilising the in-camera editing functions of their video camera they were able to film a more complex story using flashbacks, shooting a short film set at night that incorporated daytime flashbacks. The main sequence of two brothers drinking in a park was shot on the first night of filming. In the morning, the team rewound the tape and dropped in various flashback scenes to cover reminiscences of their time together. This is another example of a team applying a novel approach to comply with a rule, in-camera editing, by using the technology (and daylight) to go beyond that rule. The team demonstrated their creative agency and exhibited the depth of their idiosyncratic film production backgrounds by using standard film scheduling techniques, filming scenes in a non-linear order, to work around the in-camera editing rule. Their 'effective solution' was rewarded by the festival judges, the field, and *Bon Voyage* (2001) was not only selected as one of the top ten films but also awarded the Best Cinematographer and In-camera Editor prizes.

There were other, unforeseen, benefits that stemmed from *The Shoot Out* rules, and contributed to the development of *The Shoot Out* domain. For instance, filmmaking teams were constantly running into each other while making their film. It is not often that film directors get an opportunity to see other directors' work practices. Not only could they see and compare what others were doing while they were waiting to use one of the items or locations, but there was also a camaraderie, with crews helping each other with expertise, props, actors and technical knowledge.

The creative system of *The Shoot Out* festival developed annually across its lifetime. The cyclic stimulation, transmission and selection of novelty, with each iteration of the festival, profoundly affected the quality and creativity of the films. This is in keeping with Kerrigan and McIntyre's finding that 'creative actions take place in social and cultural environments that have profound effects on the work' (2010, 126).

The Shoot Out participants began to realise that the best way to improve their chances of being selected in the top ten and winning a prize, or even winning the festival, required them to immerse themselves in *The Shoot Out* domain. For most filmmakers that would mean entering a few times before top ten selection. This was not the case, for instance, for a film crew lead by Jason Van Genderen, who in 2003, the fourth year of *The Shoot Out*, entered for the first time as aspiring young filmmakers and won the festival with a film called *Scrum* (2003), a comedy aligning football with war. By 2005 Van Genderen's team had developed as filmmakers and had started working in their own production company. Coming into the festival that year they were entering knowing that their work had already been deemed creatively novel by *The Shoot Out* field and the domain, which in turn had increased the individual filmmaking agency of each team member. In 2005, after six years of the festival, Van Genderen understood that 'achieving highly within the rules of a discipline' (Bailin 1988, 96) might not be enough to be noticed by the judges. By immersing themselves in the filmmaking domain through their production company, and as previous winners of *The Shoot Out*, they understood that in order to win a second time they needed to go 'beyond or change some rules' (Bailin 1988, 96).

In 2005, Van Genderen's team produced their second winning film, *Sperm Society* (2005) which was a comic claymation filmed in-camera within 24 hours. This sophisticated claymation required specific mouth movements to match the main character's address to camera as she explained to the audience that she worked for a charity collecting sperm and wanted to promote a fundraiser called *The Shoot Out*. There was no doubt that *Sperm Society* (2005) pushed the envelope, in terms of complying with the rules and going one step further by permitting rules that may inhibit and turning them into rules that enhance creativity. For example where the earlier claymation used photographs of the items as backdrops, Van Genderen built imitations of the items out of clay.

Van Genderens' self-imposed additional rule, creating a claymation, provided him with further stimulation for novelty. His choice to make the festival itself part of the film's comedic payoff would also imply his knowledge of the domain and experience working within *The Shoot Out* creative system. 'The cultural transmission of systemic knowledge is embedded in an individual's creative agency, that is, an individual's ability to make creative choices is both enabled and constrained by the structures they engage with' (Kerrigan 2013, 113).

Jason then went on to embrace other film festival technical rules, winning *Tropfest New York* with his film *Mankind is No Island* (2008) shot entirely on a mobile phone. As the *Tropfest* web site reported, Jason Van Genderen was becoming recognised as 'something of a poster boy for how to make beautiful short films on a limited budget, using unconventional techniques' (2012).

Conclusion

The Shoot Out 24 Hour Filmmaking Festival has been identified as a creative system because it can be aligned with the revised systems model of creativity (Kerrigan 2013). The rules and conditions of the festival became constraints that enabled creativity to occur because they allowed some filmmakers to absorb the 'rules and practices...to produce a novel variation...[that was] selected by the field [judges] for inclusion in the domain [festival]' (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, 315).

This argument confirms that these 'novel' interpretations of *The Shoot Out* rules were contained in the annual release of the top ten films. This annual injection of new interpretations of the rules made a significant contribution to the unique creative culture of *The Shoot Out*. By highlighting examples of novel technical and narrative production techniques it demonstrates the cyclical stimulation, transmission and selection of novelty that results from creative filmmaking practices specific to *The Shoot Out 24 Hour Filmmaking Festival*.

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