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Creative Screen Labour: Capital Reciprocity in Micro-Budget Corporate Documentary



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Abstract

Screen production is often described as 'a love project' when the film is made on a micro-budget, using volunteer labour and complex reciprocal arrangements to ensure it is completed to a professional standard. This research explores what drives a crew member work unpaid on a friend's film.

A non-economic capital exchange (Hutchinson, 2013) describes the scenario where filmmakers willingly volunteer their time in exchange for an opportunity to work on a production. Using the Bourdieusian concepts of capital, field, habitus and illusio (see Bourdieu 1986, 1990b, 1993) this paper presents my Honours research (Hutchinson 2013) analysis that explained why my crew and I agreed to make a film and not be paid for our labour.

Using a self-reflective practitioner-centred methodology, the research confirmed that two micro-budget corporate documentaries were made because of the crew members' desire to participate in filmmaking. This willingness also shaped the choices available to the production which, according to Bourdieu, allowed for a series of complex non-economic reciprocal capital exchanges to occur. Drawing upon examples from this corporate documentary-making process the research explores how my access to cultural, social and symbolic capitals within the fields of academia and filmmaking provided "the chances of success for practices" (Bourdieu 1986, 242) that enabled two films to be made.

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Introduction

My honours project titled Creative Screen Labour (Hutchinson 2013) involved the production of two corporate documentaries for an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project, *'Creativity and Cultural Production in the Hunter'*. The ARC project was being conducted by the School of Design, Communication and Information Technology at the University of Newcastle, but there was no budget committed to the production of these corporate documentaries. The first four and a half minute film, with the same title as the ARC project, provided an overview of the research project, while the second documentary Creative Newcastle presented thematic vignettes of the issues facing creative industries practitioners in Newcastle.

Screen practice research is a growing field of study that comprises a number of 'artist-academics' (Webb 2012) whose research focuses on the 'actuality of production processes' (McKinlay and Smith 2009, 5) and also the production of video

content (see Berkeley 2011, Kerrigan 2011, Bellany 2012, Hawkins 2012). The creative practice work presented here contributes to original knowledge within the field by employing Bourdieusian theory to investigate the contextually significant capitals (Bourdieu 1986, 1990b) that formed the currency for the immediate and delayed reciprocal capital exchanges for the production of the two corporate documentaries.

Employing a self-reflective, 'testing out model of research' (McIntyre 2006, 3), where the theoretical approach to research becomes the topic of investigation through practice; this exploration made it possible for me to identify the way in which the crew and I recognised the equivalency of capitals within the project.

Capital equivalencies were identified because the University offered access to the ARC project and access to equipment but no cash budget to pay the crew for their time was available. One of the theoretical concepts being researched through this filmmaking context was 'illusio' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 117) which describes the belief we had as filmmakers that to participate n the field would consequently helped us shape our filmmaking practice.

Theoretical Perspective: Bourdieusian Theory

Practice is, for Bourdieu (1984, 95), the result of the interplay between capital, field and habitus¹ and these Bourdieusian concepts formed the theoretical lens through which I explore my filmmaking practice. Central to my research is the notion of capital, which is defined by Bourdieu as,

Accumulated labour (in its materialised form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour. (1986, 241-242)

Bourdieusian theory outlines four basic forms of capital for which agents compete: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Economic capital is said to be money, or something that is recognised as money. Cultural capital is a broadly defined capital that is best understood through its varying states: the embodied state – skills that are not transferable and are acquired over time; the objectified state – cultural goods such as books, pictures, or films that are transferable; and the institutionalised state – formal qualifications (Bourdieu 1986, 243). Social capital is an agent's social standing and connections in a field and symbolic capital is field-specific capital which can be said to be 'misrecognised' as capital (Bourdieu 1990b, 118). Symbolic capital exists because it is acknowledged by others in a specific field and is related to honour, prestige and recognition.

This research uses Bourdieu's concept of capital to identify what constitutes the 'currency' – for example, the two corporate documentaries I made would be defined in Bourdieusian terms as 'objectified cultural capital'. As highlights, "capitals do not exist and function except in relation to a field" Bourdieu (1992, 101), with the field being defined as,

arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions help by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize these different kinds of capital. Fields may be thought of as structures spaces that are organised around specific types of capital or combinations of capital. (Swartz 1997, 117)

Moore adds to this concept of the field by suggesting a field is 'organized around a particular practice' (2007, 440). My field is research concerning the practice of filmmaking; which is situated within the field of media production.

A field, says Swartz, provides 'the structure of the social setting in which habitus operate' (1997, 117). Habitus is both a structured and a structuring structure, that provides the agent participating in a field with the practical sense of negotiating that structure (Bourdieu 1990b 53). This practical sense is a collection of structured dispositions (Bourdieu 1977 72) that incline agents to act and react in certain ways that are structured by their past and present circumstances and structure their present and future practices (Maton 2008, 51). The concepts of field and habitus are so very intertwined, in that to practice in a field comes from the 'ontological complicity between the habitus and the field' (Bourdieu 1990a, 194) – what Bourdieu refers to as 'illusio'. For Bourdieu, the illusio is 'a tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game and a practical mastery of its rules', (1992, 117) in other words, the belief to partake in practices.

This research is concerned with the production of two corporate documentaries, i.e., filmmaking practice in the field of media production which, in Bourdieusian terms, can be conceptualised as taking place within a field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993, 1996). While Bourdieu's analysis of fields of cultural production have most famously focus on the fields of art (1996) and literature (1993), Born highlights, 'the theory of the field of cultural production is to have created an

analytical scheme which gives due weight to the relational nature of the field and the competitive position-taking characteristic of actors engaged in cultural production' (2010, 177). This proposition forms the starting point for this research because the theory of the field of cultural production provides, as de Jong puts it, 'the canvas on to which to draw' (2008, 135). Furthermore, as Johnson states, within fields of cultural production, cultural and symbolic capitals are of most importance for the production of cultural goods (1993, 7). This point further provides a starting point to explore how the equivalency of capitals within the project help shape filmmaking practices.

Methodological Approach: Practice-Based Enquiry

Practitioner-based enquiry is a self-reflective methodological approach that allows practitioners to 'enquire into their own practices to produce assessable reports and artefacts' (Murray and Lawrence 2000, 10). McIntyre (2006) argues that the practitioner-based enquiry methodology is supported by a constructionist epistemology, which allows for reflecting on one's own institutional practices 'through a process of participation in that activity' (McIntyre 2006, 4). By participating in the activity, practitioners are constructing meaning in and out of interaction with their practice.

Practice, for Bourdieu, is unreflective tacit knowledge that is embedded in the habitus (Webb 2012, 11), however by employing a self-reflective analysis, as outlined by the theorists Cowan (1998) and Schön (1987), practitioners are able to frame their practice in a reflexive light.

As Kerrigan notes, 'self-reflective practitioners-as-researchers learn from their practical experiences' (2011, 39). Cowan (1998) and Schön (1987) identify that self-reflective research can be carried out in a number of ways they call in-action, on-action, and for-action. Self-reflection in-action allows the practitioner to think of what they are doing while they are doing it, or immediately reflect back upon it. (Schön 1987, 26). Self-reflection on-action allows for thinking back upon what has been done (Schön 1987, 26). Looking at the future, self-reflection for-action is reflecting on the activity beforehand (Cowan 1998, 37).

Analysing practices involves 'the construction of the fields where they occur and the habitus of the agents brought to those fields' (Swartz 1997, 142). While the production of the two corporate documentaries takes place in a field of cultural production (in this case media production), my reflective analysis takes place in what Wacquant (2014, 125) calls a 'social context' – the 'concrete setting' of the space of practice. In the case of this project, the setting of analysis is the production of the project in a university environment, and the analysis looks at the relationships between agents who are involved in the production of the corporate documentaries. I prefer this view over the more common usage of the notion of the field as an 'historical-analytic specification' (Wacquant 2014, 133) and a 'research tool' (Bourdieu 2005, 30), which is 'an abstraction used to apprehend and describe the relatively autonomous social microcosms that in relationship to each other make up social space' (Lipstadt 2003, 398), which provide, the field in a theoretical sense.

Practitioner-based enquiry and reflective practice are the most appropriate when exploring creative screen practice because the data generated from inside the film project enables the practitioner-researcher to build a more complete picture of the state of the creative screen work in regard to investigating the interplay of capitals.

Practitioner Analysis

In examining the reciprocity of capital exchanges within the production of the two corporate documentaries, I undertake a self-reflective analysis of my capital(s) and how I was situated within the field of practice. This self-assessment provides a baseline to assess what skills and knowledge I brought to the production.

On the two corporate documentaries that provide the case study I had many roles: director, producer, editor, sound mixer, graphic designer and colourist, and worked with a number of collaborators, a key one being my director of photography (DOP). They were micro-budget films, with no cash budget allocated by the University, however the University provided equipment resources, and I invested money and equipment in the project.

Discussed below is the reflective examination of my immediate and delayed reciprocal capital exchanges that allowed for the successful completion of the project.

Who Am I? Habitus, Capital and the Field of Media Production

Many of the decisions made in the production *Creative Screen Labour* can be traced back to my habitus and cultural capital, formed by a devout interest in the field, formal training and, most importantly, professional working experience. By reflecting on-action (Schön 1987, 26), it is possible to argue that my professional working experience is the most significant of the three because it shaped my habitus and cultural capital in that it was instrumental in giving me the skills to produce these corporate documentaries.

My acquisition of capital began formally in 2006 when I enrolled in a University course to study filmmaking. I completed my degree in 2009, and went on to work as an editor, online editor, post-production producer and colourist in a Sydney post-production house. Since graduating I have completed close to one hundred creative projects in varying film production and post-production roles. These works form both my embodied and objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 243), in that their completion provides the acquisition of skills, which in turn constitute my habitus as well as produce symbolic goods, which in turn form symbolic capital. As a colourist on video projects, I have been responsible for creating the visual 'look' in post-production by enhancing and correcting the footage shot by the DOP.

In smaller commercial markets, Newcastle for example, practitioners are required to have a diverse skill set. In more developed markets, like Sydney, practitioners are able to specialise. Specialisation helps to build and refine the acquisition of specific cultural capital. In my case within the media production field in Newcastle by specific cultural capital was significant as, with only a small handful of colourists (in contrast to many "jacks of all trades"); I could trade a very unique skill set.

Figure 1 Ungraded Still from Promotional Film.

Figure 2 Graded Still from Promotional Film.

During the early stages of this project, I discovered that when compared to my highly developed post-production skills, had less developed skills in directing and producing promotional films. Reflecting for-action (Cowan 1998, 37) allowed me to see that my strengths were in technical and finishing roles, consequently, I hoped that my habitus and cultural capital gained through television and online commercial production would be transferable into making a longer form project.

My three years of professional experience in Sydney and Newcastle ensured I had acquired sufficient capital from within the field. While media production in and of itself is a field, fields are also subject to geographic placement and as such what constitutes capital and the amount of capital you hold is determined by location. Moving between the same field in different geographical locations means that not all forms of capital are transferable. As Johnson (1993, 7) notes, within the field of cultural production, cultural and symbolic capital are of particular importance, and from those two I argue that cultural capital, in its embodied skills and objectified previous works, is the most transferable. Thus my previous work as a colourist provided the currency from which I could trade.

I hoped that my symbolic and cultural capital would be attractive to a Newcastle cinematographer, who would be willing to collaborate on my project in exchange for some colour grading on their own work. To find that potential collaborator I had

to explore Newcastle's social network or field.

As Lee points out, access to cultural capital enables one to access and acquire social capital, which in turn allows one to 'gain the resources of the network' (2008, 203). Applying this notion to my production context, I exploited my embodied and objectified cultural capital (being a colourist) in Newcastle as currency from which I acquired social and symbolic capital.

Furthermore, I found fields have their own currency, recognised as symbolic capital. In the field of media production symbolic capital forms a hierarchy based on prestige. With my media production work in Sydney being more prestigious than working in Newcastle I was moving from a higher market to a lower market and was able to use my symbolic capital as a currency in finding a suitable collaborator.

Working in a collaborative space in Newcastle, *The Roost*², was key to establishing much of my social capital. It was through this space that I got to meet local filmmakers, including the DOP with whom I collaborated. Similarly my involvement with the group *Film Republic*² helped introduce me to others in the industry. Within both these groups it became common knowledge that I had been working in Sydney in post-production – and I used my symbolic capital (previous work and reputation) to help shape and build my social capital in my new field of Newcastle.

Collaboration is Key

The belief that the game is worth playing is of key significance in the media industry, as the underlying rules of the many fields enforce a culture of work experience, internships and unpaid labour (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, Davis and Sigthorsson 2013) particularly for those in the dominated position (Bourdieu 1993, 118). Cultural, social and symbolic capitals form the currency for those in the dominated position. In the film industry this unpaid work is said to be good for one's portfolio, and such a form of capital can offset the lack of economic capital that was dedicated to this project.

My relationship with my DOP is representative of the exchange of non-economic capital because we occupied a similarly dominated position within the field. As Bourdieu highlights:

[the] social space is so constructed that agents who occupy similar or neighboring positions are placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, and therefore have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing practices that are themselves similar. (1989, 17)

Practitioners of similar positions within the field of media production value the same currency of capital and recognise their equivalency of exchange, founded on the principle of reciprocity. This, coupled with the belief to participate – illusio – means those practicing within the field believe it to be worthwhile. Hence illusio helps to shape practice.

From the outset I made it clear to the DoP that there was no budget for the project, which was a portfolio piece for me. He also wanted to add to his portfolio and our skills sets complemented each other's. When I had previously worked with this DoP we had formed a friendship around our shared illusio – this was evidenced by our talk outside of work, which was about work as working in the media industry is as much a hobby, a source of enjoyment, as it is about work. As outlined by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) the forming of friendships within cultural production fields is quite common.

This is of significance in that our friendship also played a part in my asking him to work with me on this project – an exploitation of existing social capital. In our meetings to plan working together on the project it was established that my cultural capital would provide a currency that would form the basis for the capital exchanges involved in the project.

Traditionally the DOP and the colourist exist in a symbiotic relationship, hence our mutually agreed currency for immediate and delayed reciprocity, would be cultural capital for cultural capital. Free of charge my DOP would collaborate in developing a visual style and film the project, and in return I would provide my skills as a colourist to grade existing and upcoming projects for him.

With my DOP in place as key collaborator I could begin to find suitable people for the film who would discuss on-camera their experience of Newcastle's creative industries. It was a conscious decision to use a pre-existing social relationship with the owner of a Newcastle, post-production house (who will be referenced as FP in this paper) to ask for his assistance. On-reflection, FP met all the necessary criteria because he provided an authentic perspective about his experiences of Newcastle's creative industries and had more symbolic capital with Newcastle's media production field, as evidenced by the type of projects he has worked on⁴.

As Elafros highlights strategies 'are a specific orientation of practice, and they can be both conscious and unconscious' (2012, 466). By purposely contacting FP for an interview, I hoped he would be able to see the quality work that the DoP and I were producing. This was a strategic attempt to acquire more symbolic capital that could help elevate our own cultural capitals in the Newcastle media production field.

An email exchange with FP in October 2013 confirmed that he had recognised and appreciated the quality of our work, so much so that FP wished to secure more work for the DOP to film a 'behind the scenes' documentary for an upcoming feature film. The DOP obtained an interview with the feature film director on the strength of his work on *Creative Newcastle*⁵.

In analysing these series of events in relation to capital exchanges, we see that the objectified cultural capital acquired by the DOP through his work on Creative Newcastle lead to the acquisition of symbolic capital. This series of exchanges, which resulted in the DOP being interviewed for a job, was one of a number of infinitely complex exchanges that led the DOP to that situation. These complex series of capital exchanges stem from an initial reciprocal exchange of capital, founded in cultural-for-cultural exchanges and what is described here as the cyclical nature of capital.

Reconstituted and Reconfigured: Who am I?

As Bourdieu asserts,

Habitus change constantly as a function of new experiences. Dispositions are subject to a sort of permanent revision, but one that is never radical, given that it operates on the basis of premises instituted in the previous state. They are characterized by a combination of constancy and variation that fluctuates according to the individual and her degree of rigidity or flexibility. (2000, 161)

On this project I was able to reconstitute my existing habitus through the acquisition of newly formed embodied cultural capital – specifically learning the structure and conventions of promotional filmmaking via practice. As Hillier and Rooksby assert the 'habitus is constructed through, and in turn constructs, capital' (2002, 13), with capital being defined as accumulated labour (Bourdieu 1986, 241). Adkins suggests that 'Bourdieu fails to elaborate the process of abstraction and quantification of labour into units of time' (2011, 347) and as such there are no minimum or maximum timeframes placed on this acquisition and its absorption into the habitus. Here the only measure that is able to be performed is a self-reflexive analysis. This research exemplifies that the notion that habitus can be both reconstituted – transformed from one domain to another similar domain – and reinforced – reapplied and strengthened through practice. The result of this reinforcement is a more efficient habitus.

The creative freedom, which is tied into the fact that this project falls into the micro-budget spectrum, allows for change in the production process. This project was also used to intentionally acquire new capital – while having a strong constitution for editing and knowledge of post-production (my existing habitus and capital) and in a project with economic capital (after all *time is money*), I would have edited in *Final Cut Pro* – the software I have been using since 2006. But because I wanted to learn *AVID Media Composer*, I took the relative timeline of this project (not a week turn around, but a month) to do so in a practical context. Coincidentally, a month after this project was completed I was offered an assistant editor position on an eight part factual entertainment show using *AVID*. As with the DOP, I was recommended for this position by FP and, without the capital acquired through this project, it would have been a lot harder to take on the job. Furthermore, the objectified cultural capital, of the documentaries themselves provides currency from which I am able to pitch for future work.

Conclusion

This self-reflective analysis confirms that capital exchanges are fluid and represent an infinitely reiterative process, an ouroboros of transformation and reconfiguration. Filmmaking practice is an iterative process that impacts and is impacted upon by the habitus and capital throughout every moment of practice. The exchanges that occurred between me, as the practitioner-researcher, and my collaborators confirmed reciprocity exists around established or pre-existing cultural capital that is transferred or re-cycled into social and symbolic capital, to benefit those involved.

The commitment of the practitioners on this project to participating in the media production field is so unquestionable that the value of non-economic capital exchanges can be offset by the potential acquisition of capital and field position – thus making these exchanges worth the cost of investment (this was paramount in the completion of these two films). Within

this project, this collective illusio shapes the way in which practitioners of similar positions within the field of media production value the same capitals, use the same currency and recognise their equivalency of exchange. Furthermore, the immediate and delayed reciprocity based around the exchange of cultural capital founded upon social and symbolic capital relationships were key to the successful production of this micro budget film project.

The significance of this research is that it provides one theoretical explanation of why filmmakers undertake unpaid work, by explaining the benefits of gaining a filmmaking experience and how that can lead to other valuable capital exchanges. In this case improving one's reputation, or building a symbolic social capital, and eventually being hired to do a paid job based on your unpaid work.

While Bourdieusian theory has been previously employed to the field of screen practitioner research, it has mostly been through the concept of habitus and its application as a methodological concept in understanding tacit practices (see Berkeley 2011, Bellany 2012). I hope that future research in the screen practitioner field can apply more Bourdieusian concepts as both a topic and a tool (Wacquant 2011) to more adequately explain why filmmakers willingly negotiate reciprocal capital arrangements.

¹ Summarised by the equation {[(habitus) x (capital)] } + field = practice. As Wacquant, L. (2014). "Putting Habitus in its Place: Rejoinder to the Symposium." Body & Society 20(2): 118-139. Note, the equation is intended to be used as a mnemonic device.

² The Roost is a collaborative space used by many freelance workers from the creative industries.

³ A monthly social gathering of people that work in the media production industry in Newcastle.

⁴ FP has worked on international feature films, documentaries, national TVCs and music videos.

⁵ He is at present still working with that film production company.

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