

Mobile Moving Image Culture & Smartphone Filmmaking

Past, Present & Future

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Abstract. Over the last decade, smartphone filmmaking evolved from an underground and art house into an egalitarian filmmaking practice and moving-image culture. In an international context mobile, smartphone and pocket films can provide access to filmmaking tools and technologies for a new generation of filmmakers. Max Schleser will review the developments and directions in mobile, smartphone and pocket filmmaking through the *International Mobile Innovation Screenings* (www.mina.pro). During the last ten years, he curated the screening and smartphone film festival, which captures and celebrates smartphone films about communities and cities from around the world. Mobile, smartphone and pocket filmmaking expands the tradition of experimental filmmaking, expanded cinema and documentary making. Smartphone filmmaking facilitates experimentation. This presentation will outline how early mobile filmmaking aesthetics still resonate in contemporary smartphones films and documentaries that screen at major festivals such as Berlinale or Festival de Cannes. Furthermore, mobile moving image aesthetics now influence filmmaking more generally.

As Creative Arts research in screen and digital media, Max Schleser's research projects are also disseminated via non-traditional research outputs. He applies practice-led research to examine novel film forms and formats. His creative practice focuses on filmmaking and curation. Max Schleser has demonstrated how mobile media can drive social innovation in interdisciplinary research projects. To establish a conversation on mobile media's potential for transdisciplinary research, he co-edited *Mobile Media Making in an Age of Smartphones* and *Mobile Story Making in an Age of Smartphones*. His monograph, *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory & Practice* will be published by Bloomsbury in September 2021.

1. Introduction

In 2012 I was interviewed by *The Next Web* magazine for "The Future Of Mobile", alongside other experts in the world of mobile media such as Howard Rheingold, author of *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002). I argued that one "should not only consider mobile media as screen media like TV or desktop computers, but a social interactive and multi-nodal network media that links to communities, provides new insights through visual communication, while providing access in many respects for a global audience. The notions of sociability and connectivity are and will be key in the future of mobile media." (Schleser 2012 online)

Writing in the Blog for the *MoJo Conference*, I explained that I still agree with most of that statement but in 2020 I would substitute "visual communication" for "storytelling".

“We have come a long way from the distinctive visual aesthetic seen in much mobile filmmaking prior to the arrival of the iPhone 4S in 2011. Nowadays, smartphones can produce broadcast quality video when combined with an external microphone, a gimbal or tripod, and apps like Filmic Pro, Luma Fusion and Adobe Rush. This makes them a television studio or editing suite in your pocket. But they also offer novel connections within communities through storytelling.” (Schleser 2020 online)

2. CINEMA & PLACE with a focus on Peripheral cinema

For the 2nd *International Moving Image Cultures Conference* I would like to address the theme CINEMA & PLACE with a focus on Peripheral cinema (cinema in the rural areas, DIY film production, and self-distribution) through the web series *Tales from Yarriambiack Shire* (<http://bit.ly/YarriambiackTales>), which I presented at the IMOVICCON conference in 2019. The research project was commissioned by Yarriambiack Shire council (Australia, Victoria). In the forthcoming edited collection *Mobile Story* the chapter “Mobile & Digital Stories from Down Under: Tales from Rural Australia”, by Hilary Davis and myself discusses the project in detail with reference to Social Innovation in digital storytelling. To give some context; “Yarriambiack Shire is a local government area in Victoria, Australia, located in the north-western part of the state, more than four hours’ drive northwest from the capital city of Melbourne. It covers an area of 7,158 square kilometres and, at the 2016 Census, had a population of 6,674. Yarriambiack Shire includes a number of towns – five of which are included in these mobile-mentaries (Schleser 2011), that is, the towns of Hopetoun, Murtoa, Rupanyup, Beulah and Minyip. The populations vary for the townships, the largest is Murtoa (865 people), Beulah has the smallest population (429 people).” (Davis and Schleser forthcoming).

For this article I would like to focus on the collaborative process and also explore the distinction between community engaged practise and disseminating the mobile-mentary (mobile documentary) at film festival, such as St Kilda Film Festival (Australia) and New York University International Cellphone Cinema Showcase (USA). *Tales from Yarriambiack Shire* screened as a finalist at Australia’s longest running short film festival and the international online showcase curated by Karl Bardosh. During the production process for *Tales from Yarriambiack Shire* we worked with community members to co-create the stories who had no or very little experience in storytelling or filmmaking. We realised that certain shots are of significant value for community members, but do not support the story well and in the context of a short film for film festival submission might not be relevant. As a result, we developed two versions of the short films, a short and sharp version for film festival submission and a longer version for the community project and the YouTube channel. The community versions are about seven minutes and included shots and locations that were of significance to the community. Also, we aimed at being as inclusive as possible and feature as many community members as we could. From a storytelling perspective some of these creative decisions did not make it into the festival cut. In the same way as a film director release a special ‘directors cut’, we developed two versions. One for the community with community members making the final cut decisions and one for film festival dissemination with a story focus.

Due to COVID-19 we could not screen the short films in the community. The project was conceptualised with the idea to screen the mobile-mentaries in the community and organise smartphone filmmaking and digital storytelling workshops as part of the screening. We envisioned that these short films would be an inspiration and the community members could continue to produce work and share this on their social media channels. In the consultation we also realised that certain community groups and city councils needs further upskilling in digital literacies. We addressed this issue with a smartphone filmmaking workshop, which received great feedback by the participants. As Adobe Education Leader I am passionate about using Adobe software for workshops, especially Adobe Spark Page or Adobe spark Video, which are free online and mobile applications. Also, Adobe Rush is a great mobile and desktop editing application. Especially for rural areas smartphone filmmaking provides access to

filmmaking tools and technologies and can enable for unheard voices to resonate. The Internet, as McLuhan's "global village" (McLuhan 1962) enables a showcase to a global audience. As a case study *Tales from Yarriambiack Shire* demonstrates the potential for DIY and low-budget film production and self-distribution. In the production process we used the story canvas, which is available as a resource distributed via Creative Commons to map out the storytelling process and a create the story structure. The story structure is based upon Max Schleser's *Social Media Storytelling Template* (2015).

3. The Expanded Cinema & Moving Image

In the forthcoming book *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory & Practise* I position smartphone filmmaking in domain of experimental screen production and moving-image arts. Smartphone filmmaking opens up avant-garde traditions in filmmaking, such as Expanded Cinema (Youngblood 1970). The accessibility of smartphones facilitates experimentation beyond the gallery space and "rejects the traditional one-way relationship between the audience and the screen" (Tate Online 2021).

While smart phone cameras are now at a technical standard at 2K, 4K or Samsung Galaxy S20 with 8K and several other assessors like tripods, gimbals, external microphones and ND filters, the smartphone filmmaker's production capacity can operate in professional standards as much as media arts or Intermedia (Youngblood 1970). From my point of view the innovative element is not related to technical capabilities necessarily, but rather the exploration of aesthetics, new audio-visual forms and storytelling formats. When reviewing the history of filmmaking one can notice that alternative traditions influenced mainstream filmmaking. For instance, the French New Wave developed new filmmaking styles and consequently new approaches to editing. These innovations, working with 16mm cameras in the streets, influences more contemporary approaches like Dogme 95 filmmaking movement. The French New Wave Filmmakers in the late sixties and early seventies were inspired by Soviet filmmakers, such as Dziga Vertov. Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin amongst others formed the Dziga Vertov Group at that time. These French New Wave filmmakers worked with non-professional actors, embraced the streets as opposed to the Hollywood studio and worked in more spontaneous and serendipitous approaches. In the book *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory & Practice* I refer to Astruc who in 'The Birth of a New Avant-garde: La Camera Stylo' predicted a camera pen that allowed artist to express themselves "however abstract they may be" (Astruc in Schleser 2021). This would create filmmaking and allow moving-image artist to create films in the same way as writing a novel or essay. The smartphone or contemporary pocket cameras are very close this new age of cinema, the age of the camera-stylo. For my own work Dziga Vertov was a main inspiration that resulted in the work *Max With a Keitai*. Very much as Vertov's film, this is a self-reflective film exploring the filmmaking process. In moving-image arts methods form and process are as important to consider as the outcome of a research project, i.e. the film or as Vertov described his project 'an experiment in cinematic communication' (Vertov 1929).

4. Moving Image Artform & Moving Image Methodologies

When exploring artistic innovations in digital media and moving image production and studying mobile screens and visual aesthetics, Creative Practice Research (CPR) provides a licence for interventions, disruptions and most significantly experimentation. As Creative Arts researchers we can use methods from within our own discipline rather than borrowing social science or ethnographic approaches. These might work well to support practice-based research, but in the case of practice-led research a creative arts project can drive innovation from within the discipline and field of research.

Writing in the *Cognitive Two-Steps* Ross Gibson outlines 13 key moments in the filmmaker-researcher experience. Within this sequence number eight (as quoted in the following) and ten (as mentioned on the next page) are key for moving-image arts;

"Generate the knowledge, using the method. This is an iterative, creative and cumulative and

sometimes recursive and revisionary process.” (Gibson in Batty and Kerrigan 2018, X)

Again, I would like to emphasise that it is significant to recognize the contribution not only in the final outcome of the NTRO, i.e. the moving-image art work or refinement in visual aesthetics, but also novel developments in the creative process. For community engaged and collaborative storytelling projects or analysis of Visual Society, the recent work by Patricia Zimmermann provides a good starting point for a research investigation into storytelling and Visual Culture more generally. Writing in *Open Space Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory & Practice* she argues for a “shift away from a narrow focus on the highly crafted finished product toward responsive and iterative processes deployed across platforms and places” (Zimmermann and De Michiel 2018, 141) In her book she outlines a *Ten Working Principles*, which provide a framework for the analysis of participatory approaches;

- Circularity
- Collaboration
- Community
- Complexity
- Composting
- Connection
- Context
- Continuum
- Conversation
- Cost

(Zimmermann and De Michiel 2018, 102).

In her more recent book *Documentary Across Platforms* she makes a case for “small-scale, local, sustainable, modestly resourced, long-time-frame collaborative projects”, which are according to her often ignored by festivals, museums, new media convenings, and scholars as utopian imaginary (Zimmermann 2019, 232). Furthermore, she defines this dynamic space an “unresolved realm” (Zimmermann 2019, 232), which means as a community of researchers we can make contributions in this area. While being conscious that change making processes take time, Visual Storytelling in Digital Society, can embrace people and places one by one. Creativity is transformative and digital storytelling provides opportunities for engaging in change making processes.

Writing in *Practitioner centred methodological approaches to Creative Media Practice Research* Susan Kerrigan and Phillip McIntyre discuss Practice-based Enquiry (PBE) as a methodology which offers agency to creatives in defining individualised problem-based research, whether this is for media production practitioners or students at undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD level. The overall outcome, the acquisition of new knowledge can thus be translated into innovation within a project, the discipline or an industry framework;

“By moving the research focus away from the product that is created and focusing it on the structures of practice that are used to create a product, the research enquiry becomes more attuned to the individual’s level of skill and their ability to negotiate problems that arise in the project which need creative solutions.” (Kerrigan & McIntyre 2019, p.214)

Kerrigan and McIntyre discuss the self-directed research questions and examine these within the level of study. Kerrigan exemplifies this through her CPR work which includes a 149-page learning journal for the NTRO *Using Fort Scratchley*, Documentary DVD (53 minutes) and *Fort Scratchley a Living History* i-doc (interactive documentary).

As in other science disciplines, a PhD needs to be replicated ‘under laboratory’ conditions. For CPR it is not only important to create innovative work, the writing up and dissemination of the work is also key. In the digital universe of network media, video sharing and streaming platforms, NTROs can go offline, disappear due to end of webserver funding or no longer curated festival or video channels and

profile pages. A short synopsis on program note will also not account for the contribution that projects have created. Referring back to the *Handbook of Screen Production* Gibson points at the significance of dissemination;

“Get ready to communicate your freshly acquired knowledge explicitly, using evidence to back up your contentions, using written language as well as evidence within the audio-visual creation to show that some significant new knowledge or understanding has been attained and made explicit and communicable through the creative and practice-based activities as well as through the theoretical, historical and analytical processes that tend to rely more on verbal language published in textual form.”

(Gibson in Batty and Kerrigan 2018, X)

Within Moving-Image Arts and Expanded Cinema, the case of mobile, smartphone and pocket filmmaking provides a great example to point at contributions that scholarly disseminated Creative Arts research not only creates new knowledge, but also establishes opportunities in the Creative Industries. As mentioned in *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory & Practice*, a number of filmmakers, such as Benoît Labourdette, Anders Weberg, Felipe Cardona and Aryan Kaganoff amongst others developed mobile storytelling and smartphone filmmaking approaches before this was recognised by Steven Soderbergh with his Hollywood blockbuster as well as Netflix episodes and Sean Baker’s success in the independent filmmaking festival circuit. To find information about these projects without scholarly dissemination would be an extensive and almost impossible inquiry. When discussing mobile, pocket and smartphone filmmaking, these filmmakers set a key frame on the still quite young, but significantly growing timeline of mobile media. Despite the aesthetic refinement and the next generation of smartphones, the argument about “the experience of location, notions of personal, immediate and intimate qualities” (as defined as outcome of practice-led research in 2010 under the umbrella of the Keitai Aesthetic) in the early mobile media works, provides a reference point for the discussion of contemporary smartphone films and moving-image arts works. In a recent book chapter *Mobile Cinematic VR*, I demonstrate the contribution this aesthetics can make to understanding the contemporary development towards Cinematic VR.

5. Practice-led research

While there are a number of methodological approaches related to CPR this article focuses on practice-led research. A good overview in terms of its differentiations and nuances in CPR is provided by Filmmaking Research Network.

Writing in *Screen Production Research* Batty and Kerrigan associate “rigorous insights into how a work was made” (Batty and Kerrigan 2018, p.1) with practice-led research. Within this contribution to knowledge emerges out of the work, either in the process or the artefact. A research question will provide the necessary focus to drive the inquiry. Referring back to Batty and Kerrigan this is identified “as a site for systematically gathering reflections on the process of doing/making, in order to contribute knowledge to the practice of doing/making” (Batty and Kerrigan 2018, p.7).

Within CPR there are several related terminologies used, the research question is the key indicator for the chosen approach. As in PBE this can be scaffolded, the research question will define and inform the choice of research method. Being trained in the domain of practice-led research (in the UK at CREAM, Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media), where the creative art work drives the research inquiry and the contribution to knowledge emerges out of the creative practice, some definitions will help to anchor this position;

“Practice-led research is a distinctive feature of the research activity in the creative and performing arts. As with other research conducted by arts and humanities researchers, it involves the identification of research questions and problems, but the research methods, contexts and outputs then involve a significant focus on creative practice. This type of research thus aims, through creativity and practice, to illuminate or bring about new knowledge and understanding, and it results in outputs that

may not be text-based, but rather a performance (music, dance, drama), design, film, or exhibition”. (Arts and Humanities Research Board in Smith and Dean 2009)

Depending on the scale and dimension of the research inquiry, one might have a set of questions and depending on the project sub questions. For a PhD project a set of questions can be useful as this allows a positioning of the work among peers (such as developments in the creative industry or the creative arts) and working within a particular trajectory. A historical approach can establish some linkages to practices, movements, directions by a particular group of artists, filmmakers, designers, photographers and/or storytellers. As PhD projects require a minimum of three years engagement with a particular field, subset or a well-defined intersection of study areas, creative arts PhDs can curate and define a particular set of emerging movements or novel creative practice approaches. In the exponential growth of mobile media, emerging media and creative arts 4.0 (as defined by Kim Vincs at the Smart Storytelling Day) PhD research projects can give new Moving-Image Art forms and formats a particular direction.

According to Susan Kerrigan and Phillip McIntyre

“a precisely crafted research question focused on creative media practice must be designed by the researcher to ensure the collection and examination of reflective practice data complies with the reflective practice techniques being employed.” (Kerrigan & McIntyre 2019, p.214)

Through a rigorous study of contemporary publicly disseminated work and contributing with the final presentation of the work to a particular aesthetic refinement, movement or creative practice approach, CPR researchers can demonstrate their innovation. Writing in *The Role of the Artefact and Frameworks for Practice-based Research*, Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds position the designing, developing and making of artefacts as “the central activity in the research process” (Candy and Edmonds, p.123).

They see two sets of questions as a starting point;

one to “explore the literature of the field and, in parallel, to generate questions relating to practice; in the other, the questions came directly out of the basis of practice without reference to theoretical knowledge, at least in the first instance” (Candy and Edmonds, p 123).

They emphasise the reflection and evaluation within the research, which they define as a “systematic process that results in new knowledge or new understanding” and in “a trajectory of practice and research”, which is defined by “three elements: practice, theory and evaluation” (Candy and Edmonds, p.130).

According to Candy and Edmonds, this process is based on a framework, which utilises theoretical knowledge and “shapes the evaluation process” (Candy and Edmonds, p.130). They define this as cyclical and iterative. Depending on the chosen trajectory, the creative practice can drive the development of theory. As research method, CPR is characterised by a “systematic process pointing to the ways a researcher goes about acquiring new knowledge” (Kerrigan & McIntyre 2019, p.213). The process will need to be documented thoroughly and forms part of the exegesis. As mentioned before, a PhD needs to be able to be replicated. Therefore, the creative processes needs to be documented and archived in a way that the decision-making process can be revealed. While in an industry context production pipelines are researched prior production and not too much change is expected in the day-to-day business of the operation, in a practice-led research the formulation of innovative processes can be part of the project. “Methods themselves are the precise procedures used to acquire evidence of practice.” The record of the production process can be in the form of a digital artefact (i.e. blog, Adobe Spark Page, Vimeo or YouTube account, curated Hashtags, etc). As part of this process, it is key to timestamp the work-in-progress and provide regular reflection upon it. “While production documents are normally cast off as by-products of practice, for PBE these are archived as evidence of a staged creative process or seen as artefacts that give insight into the interactions with the field and domain which make up a creative system” (Kerrigan & McIntyre 2019, p.215).

6. Conclusion

CPR is based on a systematic process and in the form of a PhD, the exegesis will contextualise the new knowledge within its discipline (or disciplines) and the world. As part of the research, which is written up in order to be disseminated and to provide a record, an opportunity to develop a new framework, understanding(s) or/and terminology to guide the analysis, is presented. Innovation in the artefact can also echo developments towards novel frameworks, which are developed for the analysis, examination, and self-reflection of the creative work. The theoretical underpinning will provide a relevant discourse to situate these discussions. By means of starting the investigation within a certain discipline, a particular framework and set of theoretical foundations for analysis is established. This reflexive relationship between theory and practice can also provide key opportunities for Moving Image & Entrepreneurship.

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