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***Motel*: reflections on a film production/interior design collaboration**

Abstract

A couple sit, pace the floor, or make love on the disheveled bed. She leaves in a car, driving beyond the future. He arrives from the past, and can only stay half an hour. In Motel, three short films explore the spaces of an anonymous motel room, and the spaces of a relationship and time-travel.

Scholar/practitioners in the fields of creative arts and design are increasingly looking to locate their creative practice within a research context that leads to the development of new insights, processes and approaches. *Motel* was a trans-disciplinary practice-based research collaboration between a group of scholar/practitioners: three filmmakers and two interior designers from RMIT University. The project aimed to explore the innovative potential the academy affords to situate filmmaking and interior design practices outside usual industrial/commercial contexts so as to create what Geuens (2007) calls a 'differential space' of film production.

The *Motel* research group used techniques of reflective practice—reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön 1983)—to analyse shifts in practice and conceptual frameworks brought about by the constraints applied to the collaborative project. These constraints came from a set of collaborative 'rules' applied to the production process which, among other things, altered the usual hierarchical relationship between design and film, which privileges the director and his/her vision. In *Motel* the interior designers called a halt to the machinery of production, demanding an examination of established practices. The traditional A4 film scripts were tilted sideways and exploded, laid out alongside each other like patients in a ward, and new intimate relationships were formed. Exactly what was interior and what was exterior came into question. The space of an Australian motel room, and the space of filmmaking itself was interrogated, dissected, made new. The resulting triptych of short films is only one of the media objects to have resulted from this innovative collaboration.

Biographical notes:

David Carlin is a writer, filmmaker and Program Director of Media at RMIT University.

Paul Ritchard lectures in Film and TV production in Media at RMIT University. He is a filmmaker and musician.

Christine Rogers is a filmmaker and academic who is currently exploring the edges of genre.

Roger Kemp is a lecturer in the Interior Design Program at RMIT University. He is currently undertaking a PhD titled 'Negotiating Space: Techniques for Constructing Interiors'.

Anthony Fryatt is a lecturer in the Interior Design Program at RMIT University. He is currently undertaking a PhD titled 'The Mediated Interior'.

Keywords:

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Differential spaces of production

What is the right way to make a film? Answers to this question, and its implied corollary—*How do the professionals do it?*—are eagerly sought after by many students entering tertiary study in this field of the creative arts. After all, we educators in this field are promising to train our students for a career. Just as medical students might reasonably expect to learn at medical school correct methods to diagnose a patient, our students are hungry to be let into the secrets of professional competence and practice.

The film industry has developed well-honed norms of production (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985), in which great efficiencies have been created by the dividing up of the work of filmmaking into various hierarchically structured ‘departments’—camera, sound, script, art, post-production, and so on. These orthodox modes of production, although often challenged (see, for example, Geuens 2007, Millard 2006), nevertheless promise a secure footing to educators. They offer the illusion of a clear and settled map of how filmmaking is and should be done: craft knowledge that we can pass on to our students. An ensemble of practice may be developed from a myriad of small ‘practical tips’ and maxims, such as: *This is how you lay out a script—note: one page equals one minute of time; this is how you ‘call the shots’—not you, the director, but you over there, the first assistant director, for that is in your job description; and so on.*

At the same time most, if not all, tertiary courses in screen media practice set themselves the ambition for students to learn, as Wayne puts it, ‘*about practice instead of simply reproducing it*’ (2001: 31, italics added). Numerous pedagogical experiments and initiatives have set out to encourage the learning of ‘critical practice’ (Wayne 2003, Carlin & Ritchard 2008), drawing upon theories of reflective practice (Schon 1983), social constructivist learning (Vygotsky 1978) and problem-based learning (Savin-Baden 2003, Schwartz et al. 2001, Uden & Beaumont 2006). It makes sense, then, that our own practice-based research should investigate and experiment not just with the form and content of the films we make, but also with the processes by which we make them. This is particularly necessary if the production forms we teach our students are not to become museum pieces in the face of rapid cultural and technological change.

Motel began as a practice-based research investigation by practitioner/scholars Paul Ritchard, Christine Rogers and David Carlin, with the implicit aim of challenging ourselves to create a ‘differential space’ of film-making process. ‘Differential spaces’, in the term originally coined by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and co-opted by Geuens in his article *The Space of Production*, are ‘counter-spaces, spaces where the rules of the game no longer apply’ (2007: 418). Geuens continues: ‘Operating beyond the radar of the industry, adventurous film-makers are free to reshape the space as well as the mode of production in radically new ways’ (418). As will be discussed below, if for various reasons *Motel* succeeded only partially in opening up such a radical ‘differential space’, nevertheless it has opened up new perspectives for the filmmakers and suggested further avenues of experiment.

The ‘differential space’ created in *Motel* was marked by two connected moves: the de-centring of the film-making auteur and the re-orienting of the production process as a creative partnership between the three filmmakers and two interior designers (also practitioner/scholars), Roger Kemp and Anthony Fryatt. The latter trans-disciplinary relationship developed serendipitously, in response to institutional overtures (a push within the RMIT Design Research Institute to encourage trans-disciplinary research), but was made possible because of the experimental space already opened for the project by Ritchard, Rogers, and Carlin.

The collaborative process explored in *Motel* was documented and analysed through a methodology of reflective practice, both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schon 1983). This was initially through a project development blog (which can be found at, <http://motelrmit.wordpress.com>) and later through email correspondence, video interviews and reflective writing. This paper draws upon these various resources to elaborate the findings of the research.

An experiment in collaborative authorship

Ritchard, Rogers and Carlin’s initial experimental premise followed an approach akin to the ‘rules-based’ game played by Lars von Trier and Jorgen Leth in Von Trier’s documentary film *The Five Obstructions* (2004). In the case of *Motel* the ‘obstructions’ were:

- 1) each writer/director, none of whom had ever worked together before on a creative project, were separately to write a script for a narrative fiction film of less than ten minutes, set in and around a ‘motel’ locale, to form part of a triptych;
- 2) each script was to feature two main characters, a man and a woman;
- 3) the six different characters in the three films were to be played by the same two actors;
- 4) the final form of the triptych was to involve either the inter-cutting of the three stories or their sequential screening as ‘companion pieces’ together constituting a whole, with this decision to be made in post-production; and
- 5) the only pre-determined narrative link between the scripts was to be the motel locale.

Obstruction 5 was subsequently amended when Rogers and Carlin read a draft of the Ritchard script before commencing their own drafts. It was agreed that a theme of *time travel*, which Ritchard had initiated, resonated with the liminal nature of the ‘motel’ itself, as a space caught between destinations and times, and would be thereafter taken up by the other writers in whichever way they saw fit.

The treatment of the time travel theme in Ritchard’s script built on moods and themes inspired by the science fiction writing of J. G. Ballard, Kurt Vonnegut and, in particular, Philip K. Dick. Rogers’ screenplay used the idea of time travel to explore a story of incest between two adults (father and daughter) of the same age,

while for Carlin time-travel became metaphorical—a yearning for a past which cannot be recaptured. The tone and intention of all the scripts was markedly different, and no attempt was made to bring them closer together. Carlin reflected on the approach adopted:

We decided early on, it seems to me, that we were interested not just in each of us helping each other to write and direct a short film, but to experiment with a collaborative mode of creative production that bears some relation to the Surrealists’ ‘automatic writing’ in that, in writing our stories that were always intended to fit together in some way, we had some markers of each other’s stories (‘motel’, afterwards ‘time travel’, ‘two main characters’, etc), but that each script was developed otherwise in isolation—and that, once we read each other’s draft screenplays and saw how different they were from each other in style and mood, we made no attempt to homogenise them (perhaps realising it was impossible) but rather took their heterogeneity as a potentially positive attribute (Carlin & Rogers 2009).

It could be said that this scriptwriting approach attempted an ‘in-between’ mode of collaborative authorship. On the one hand, the obstructions encouraged the separately conceived stories to be connected more strongly than is often the case in an anthology or portmanteau film. There was a shared locale, theme and narrative elements, plus the use of common actors and creative crew including cinematographer Robin Plunkett and editor Anne Carter. On the other hand, the *Motel* scriptwriters chose, in defining their ‘differential space’, *not* to engage in detailed collaborative pre-mapping such as that undertaken in other team-written screen productions such as television drama. The latter mode of efficient industrial mass production privileges narrative consistency, but this was eschewed to allow instead for chance and unconscious connections to emerge.

The trans-disciplinary move

Interior designers Kemp and Fryatt joined the *Motel* project at a point when the scripts were already drafted. No doubt the nature of the trans-disciplinary collaboration would have been different, and had a more fundamental impact on the project’s outcomes, had the designers entered the picture earlier. For instance, the obstructions might have been conceived quite differently, perhaps causing a more far-reaching rupture with established filmmaking practices, as proposed in the conclusion to this article.

Commonly, by this stage, the scripts would be on a trajectory towards being locked down into a blueprint for the final film. However the designers’ arrival immediately complicated, in a positive sense, this momentum forward into production. It did so by forcing negotiation between two creative disciplinary traditions strange to each other. The particulars of each element of the ‘space of production’ of film-making—scripting, pre-production, shooting, etc.—were as foreign to the interior designers as they were comfortably familiar to the filmmakers, and each aspect of the approach of the interior designers likewise

foreign to the filmmakers. As Fryatt commented: ‘it was a different field, something we hadn’t done before and a way that we hadn’t worked before, so if nothing else it cast light on how we *did* work’ (Rogers & Carlin 2010).

By establishing a space of trans-disciplinary estrangement, with its consequent de-naturalization of habitual activity, the project was able to generate subtle but significant shifts in the self-conceptualisation of practice. We will discuss here three of these shifts in thinking: the re-visioning of the script as a spatial artefact; the cinematic potential of challenging the conceptual opposition of interior and exterior; and the diffusion of the project’s objects of production beyond a single linear film artefact.

1: The script as spatial artefact

When the three collaborators became five, the established slide, or perhaps drift from script into production was disrupted. At this point the *Motel* team, often with cinematographer Plunkett, began a series of extended discussions that aimed to forestall a hasty move towards conventional pre-production, allowing time instead for the most basic assumptions to be tested. Apparently straightforward elements of production were questioned, beginning with the scripts themselves, laid out in their seemingly innocent standard A4 format.

Interior designer Kemp reflected afterwards upon his and Fryatt’s entry to the project: ‘All of a sudden we were confronted by the scripts ... saying, this is where [the project] starts, whereas in other design projects we might think about what is the overall image for a brief’ (quoted in Rogers & Carlin 2010). The designers found themselves immersed in the linear progression of the three narratives embodied in the scripts, but felt they lacked the wider, more objective view of the project that they were familiar with in their own practice. Kemp continued:

Part of the problem with [the script] being on successive A4 pages is that you just can’t see it all together—I want[ed] to be able to engage somehow with all parts of the text at all times ... so [I thought] lets blow this thing up so we can actually see it all (quoted in Rogers & Carlin 2010).

Following this logic, the designers created and brought to the collaborative process what became known as the ‘rotated script’. This document, in which the three film scripts were ‘spatialised’ by being placed one above the other sideways on a huge wall-poster, evoked de Certeau’s observation: ‘Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice’ (de Certeau 1984: 115). Its form both challenged and enabled new insights for the filmmakers, as Ritchard reflected:

At about the third or fourth meeting between the five of us ... the designers unfurled the rotated script. This was an exciting moment, quite a remove from the traditional production designer presentation of drawings, models, swatches, animatics etc. What the three metre long document led us to consider was the spatial relationship between characters, locations, props, moments within a script and the corresponding links, schisms, moments of change, props etc. between each script. This was quite a

‘brainful’ to consider, albeit exciting. As it was not my usual *modus operandi* to consider these issues I kept coming back to them and still now grapple with them. It is a dialectical movement, a push and pull throughout the production process and subsequent writing, to figure out where I, and the filmmaking process would fit in with this (Ritchard 2010).

Figure 1. ‘Rotated Script’ in the film design office

In the presentation of the ‘rotated script’ and its subsequent iterations, ‘the script shifted from being simply a written document into something more closely resembling a graphic layout that generated its own spatial qualities beyond the envisioned spaces described in the text’ (Kemp et al. 2009: 156). But as can be seen from the Ritchard quote above, it was by no means clear to the filmmakers as to how to respond to the designers’ ‘rotated script’ provocation.

To begin with, the filmmakers were prompted to reflect upon the ‘tyranny of the page’ in the way that screenplays are conventionally laid out and structured. Many screenwriting books suggest ways of determining the ideal narrative structure that seem to relate more to mapping formulas than creative writing (Field 1998, Trottier 1998, Gulino 2005, Aronson 2000), and some even include complicated graphs. Although this is in response to a very particular and dense type of writing it can also act to stifle creativity. Geuens suggests that our rigid adherence to a particular form of screenwriting has contributed to the ‘petrification’ of cinema: ‘the very idea of a template ... is problematic in that it forces the most different ideas, treatments and writing styles into a grinder that homogenizes them all’ (2007: 412).

The designers, encountering the *Motel* scripts as unfamiliar textual artefacts, had taken them as sign-systems to be deconstructed, objects to be re-rendered and re-analysed, read against the grain. This was not to be merely contrary but because, for them, the fifteen page A4 scripts were so far removed, as a creative starting point, from the interior design briefs that they were used to.

The wall-mounted ‘rotated script’ forced, in turn, the filmmakers to encounter their own scripts as unfamiliar artefacts. The most immediate result was to suggest new forms of narrative and thematic mapping that may occur within and across the three scripts during the pre-production phase of the project. Hitherto unseen patterns of repetition—of motifs, images and movements—and rhythms of density—for instance, of dialogue versus screen directions—were revealed which fed in, through annotation and discussion, to approaches to production design but also to cinematography and actor direction.

The turn towards script-as-artefact also led to experiments, in particular by filmmaker Ritchard and interior designer Fryatt, producing hybrid moving image works that incorporated visualisations of text overlaid across photographed scenes from the *Motel* triptych. In other words, moving from script as preliminary blueprint to script as aesthetic visual object in its own right.

Other results were more speculative, reflecting the tensions between Geuen’s ‘differential space’ and the filmmakers’ customary practices. Time remained one traditional and present constraint. The filmmakers were committed to shoot their films within a given time-frame, whereas a more open-ended longitudinal process may have allowed for the potential of the ‘rotated script’ to be more fully explored. As Rogers commented: ‘the sideways [‘rotated script’] experiment didn’t go far enough... we did not then use it to tear up or to rend a hole in the traditional template of our scripts’ (Carlin & Rogers 2009). Such possibilities, instead, were set aside for the future.

2: Rethinking the binary: interior/exterior

One of the first (naïve) concerns of the three filmmakers, in embarking upon this collaboration with interior designers filling the role of the traditional film production-designer, was, to characterise it bluntly: ‘who will design the exteriors?’ In fact, a more nuanced and subtle understanding of the concept of ‘interiority’ and an unsettling of the seemingly straightforward binary between interior and exterior spaces proved to be one of the strongest insights for the filmmakers involved in the *Motel* project.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes: ‘Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains’ (1969: 211). Bachelard turns to poets such as the Surrealist Tristan Tzara to illustrate how the rigidity of the binary ‘common-sense’ opposition of interior and exterior breaks down in the subjective experience and imagination of space. He quotes Tzara’s writing:

Le marché du soleil est entré dans la chambre
Et la chambre dans la tête bourdonnante.

The market of the sun has come into my room
And the room into my buzzing head (Bachelard 1969: 226).

This blurring of exterior/interior conjured by the poet brings into focus the conceptual approach taken by the interior designers, Kemp and Fryatt, in which spaces are always viewed as inhabited and configured by subjective relationships. Their method, for *Motel*, was to take locations described in the scripts, such as the highway, the motel room, the inside of the car and the motel office and ‘to draw out more detailed relationships occurring in those spaces that presented conditions of interiority and indeed exteriority’ (Kemp et al 2009: 155). The sketches and diagrams with which they mapped these conditions (see figures 2 and 3) became provocations for the writer-directors. Rogers, for instance, was led to question her consideration of the mise en scene of *The Papin Sisters*:

Was the [motel room] bed itself, looming so large on the floor plan, exterior, or interior? And if it was interior, than what was exterior? And how then could this notion be applied to the two bodies who would populate the space, move on and off the bed? (Rogers 2010).

Taking this further, a scene of two characters isolated in the landscape on a deserted country highway might *present conditions of interiority*, the interior designers argued, in so far as the space of proximity and intimacy around the two characters might, as it were, *feel* interior. As we have discussed elsewhere : -

thinking [in *Motel*] of the idea of interiority in this way, as a phenomenon born in the subjective experience of an inhabitant of a space – or in this case of a fictional filmic character – was extremely productive in imagining how to express in cinematic terms the themes of emotional connection and distance that were increasingly found to resonate across the three film scripts. (Kemp et al 2009: 158)

So how, for example, might the highway scene discussed above be represented cinematically as an interior, intimate space? The directorial palette of options is not new; choice of lens, control of depth of field and lighting, choices in sound recording and design, the actors’ vocal qualities, and their gestures and affects. However once again it is the reflection-in-action prompted by the trans-disciplinary collaboration that is valuable here, for as Schon would have it, the filmmaker ‘allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique (1983: 68)’—namely a scene that seems self-evidently ‘exterior’ is being reconceived as *interior*.

A focus on conditions of interiority proved particularly apt for this project given the centrality of the spatial metaphor of the motel. The motel, as Sarah Treadwell has argued evocatively, ‘is a transit form that mediates between the fixed address and vagrancy, between home and car. A form of accommodation that consists of road sign and interior; the homeliness of the motel has a minimal external condition’ (Treadwell 2005: 214). This conception of the motel as having a

‘minimal external condition’ was taken up across the *Motel* triptych, its momentum driven by the interventions of the interior designers. Rogers’ film appears first in the completed triptych. The action takes place entirely inside a motel room that appears suspended in time and space: views out of windows and doors are washed out by lighting or elided through framing and editing. In the second film, Carlin’s *Spiral*, the motel’s exteriors are witnessed, but for the most part as tableaux: eerie, faded still-lives, isolated from the surrounding landscape. Finally, in Ritchard’s *Agency Time*, which completes the triptych, the motel room, seen only at night, is shot in empty wide shots interspersed with scenes in the claustrophobic interior of a car that travels, uncannily, forward and back in time. The film ends with the frame of the camera’s vision receding through the motel room’s Venetian blinds into a murky nothingness beyond. Each film expresses its own sense of what is interior and what is exterior, and each filmmaker reported new insights around this based on this collaboration.

Figure 2: Car Diagram: Interior/exterior by Anthony Fryatt, 2008

Figure 3: Motel room diagram: interior/exterior by Anthony Fryatt, 2008

Figure 4: Actors on set, Motel, 2008

3: *Process as product*

The trans-disciplinary *Motel* collaboration has produced a dispersed series of media objects, rather than having its output concentrated in a single cinematic product. The design orientation brought to the project by the interior designers, and the project's explicit framing as research investigating collaboration, have led to the creation of a proliferation of media artefacts and outcomes, many of which reveal and comment upon the specific processes of development and production.

The film triptych itself has reached a relatively fixed, and in many ways traditional form in which to be exhibited, although its 30-minute length marks it as outside conventional distribution parameters for commercial cinema release, broadcast television or film festivals. Meanwhile, various more radically intercut versions of the three films have also been attempted, but none which approach the dynamic possibilities suggested by the rotated script. Instead a number of smaller-scale hybrid film/design objects have been created. These range from diagrammatic poster-images to layered graphic videos such as the experiments described earlier, featuring abstracted text from scripts overlaid on moving images.

To some extent, certainly, this fragmentation or multiple-versioning of the media object simply reflects the condition of cinema in the contemporary screen environment, where, for instance, a feature film will have DVD versions with commentaries and extra features, 'director's cuts', deleted scenes, trailers on YouTube, a custom-built website with diverse 'behind the scenes' video content pertaining to the film, and so on. In this sense it could be argued that the *Motel* outcomes are little different from a standard set of 'making of' artefacts accompanying a cinematic product.

But once again, it is the element of uncertainty or surprise inserted into the film-making process by the trans-disciplinary collaboration that is of interest here. Objects perceived as development or pre-production tools by the filmmakers were taken up by the designers as meaningful outcomes to be developed for their own sake. The filmmakers were challenged to step outside the tracks of accepted professional practice and consider the logic of different processes and goals. This dialogue culminated in the mounting of an exhibition by the project team at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Melbourne: *Motel: Time Travel, Distance, Duration* (Fryatt et al. 2009).

The exhibition was in the form of a gallery installation that conceived of the film production process as a layering of spaces: the prototypical imagined spaces of the scripts, the physical sets and locations, the camera's framed space, the screen of the on-set monitor and the screen of the final projected image. Different planes of the film set 'flats' were separated and re-hung within the gallery. A video camera was set up to shoot live images looking through the planes in depth, and these images were fed to an external monitor viewable in the gallery. The visitor to the installation was able to inhabit and move between the various spatial experiences. At the same time, a surround soundtrack had been created and installed, featuring 'single words and phrases crossing over one another giving an aural snapshot of

the three films' (Ritchard 2010). The triptych itself and the other hybrid artefacts created both in paper and digital (moving image) form were variously projected or displayed on monitors.

Ritchard reflected:

This kind of exhibition, installation, presentation of work is a normal part of the academic process of the interior designers. It gave me the ability to see the filmmaking process as having more than just its linear outcome, the tools to analyse more deeply the notion of space in film. It has opened up the way for collaborations with other academics where we could investigate colour, fashion, sound etc (Ritchard 2010).

It became evident to the collaborators that the *Motel* project's value had shifted. Rather than a destination in itself focused on a single unified product (a film) it had become a staging point, a probe revealing for each of the practitioners involved some of the blind-spots in his or her own disciplinary assumptions and some of the creative opportunities which are present in challenging these assumptions.

Figure 5: *Motel* Exhibition at Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2009

Conclusion

The practice/research undertaken in the project has focused on processes of trans-disciplinary collaboration, above and beyond the achievement of a film product. Having completed the *Motel* project, the five practitioner/researchers, Carlin, Ritchard, Rogers, Kemp and Fryatt, can look back now upon the five 'obstructions' with which the filmmakers started the collaboration, and reflect upon the type of rules (obstructions) we might set ourselves, as a trans-disciplinary film/design group, for a future collaboration. These, we posit, might take a more genuinely disruptive turn. Instead of setting rules only for the scripting process, we could agree, for example, to some or all of the following:

- 1) to commence with no preconceptions as to the nature and form of the film/design artefact(s) to be produced through the collaboration (being open, for instance, to produce a multi-screen site-specific installation rather than a linear film narrative);
- 2) to slow down the production (shooting) stage of the artefact creation, allowing for the emergence of trans-disciplinary play and adjustments in direction. (In *Motel* we slowed down, to a greater or lesser extent, both pre- and post-production but *not* the production stage, which is conventionally the most rigid and time-pressured, owing to the economics and logistics involved. However, there is no reason production occurring within a non-commercial (research) context with contemporary technologies needs to be tied to this convention);
- 3) further to 2) above, to remove entirely the discrete boundaries and assumed linear progression between pre-production, production and post-production (recognizing that these are already somewhat blurred even in conventional film-making practice, by, for example, re-shoots);
- 4) to extend the logic of the script as artefact, further removing it from its standardised 'individual reader' A4 format, and experimenting with 'blowing it up' into a collaborative or even public document allowing for new, more distributed modes of narrative development and metaphor/image creation;
- 5) a game-based approach in which each of us is allowed to choose a single obstruction, obscure or otherwise, to create an ensemble of rules by which we all are bound.

Each of these proposed rules extends the logic of the *Motel* collaboration and its premise; namely that a professional discipline such as film-making or interior design may be productively renewed through a strategy of deliberate professional estrangement, or reframing (Schon 1983), through trans-disciplinary collaboration. Analysing the impact of such practice-based research on pedagogical approaches in higher education in the field of screen production must be the subject of future studies.

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