72 HOURS

In 2008 a feature film called *Watching & Waiting* was pre-selected for screening at the 20th Galway Film Fleadh. The problem was – it hadn't been made. *Watching & Waiting* was shot, edited and screened to a full house at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway over the space of 72 hours during the 20th Fleadh. Last summer the feat was repeated when *The Ballad of Des & Mo* was shot, edited and screened at the 59th Melbourne International Film Festival, making it into the Audience Top Ten. Film director and academic James Fair insists that this is more than a gimmick; it's an introduction to a whole new branch of film academia.

How did the 72-Hour project start?
Journalists have exaggerated the fact that it began over a liquid lunch I had in Dublin with producer Conor Murphy. That's only partly true. In reality, we had studied film together at UCD and Conor had sat in on a thesis presentation I gave on 'The Impact of Digital Technology upon the Filmmaking Production Process'. He was really just quizzing me further over a few pints and challenging me to prove my theories. That was Christmas 2007. By July 2008 we stood before a full house in the Town Hall Theatre in Galway with a finished feature film.

What is the premise behind making a film in 72 hours?
Everyone always asks this as if it is some kind of manifesto for how we should make films. It was never really intended to be like that. I'm not really the manifesto type. It was a demonstration to prove that we could do things differently, not limiting ourselves to the same structures and dogma that surrounds traditional film production. It was an extension of my thesis really, a practical example of an academic theory.

You work as a film lecturer in the UK and your university plays a big part in your projects. How does that relationship work?
I'm incredibly lucky. My thesis was considered too technical for the film department at UCD, but I was offered a lectureship in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Technology at Staffordshire University. Our research group, the Centre of Media, Arts & Technologies (C-MAT) has been developing a very particular niche of film academia that combines theory with practice under robust scientific method. In other words, we explore technology through trial and error, asking 'what *can* this do?' instead of 'what *does* this do?' There's a big difference. My role is to hypothesise about the potential of emerging technologies and then go out and test them. I analyse and evaluate my findings before coming back and sharing the research with my students. The students are all doing the same thing with their projects, so it's a constantly rewarding experience.

You've developed an MSc in Digital Feature Film Production at Staffordshire University, which you hope to launch soon in Ireland through Filmbase. What is the background to the MSc programme?

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Photo by Erminia Colucci

It's the Masters degree that I'd love to have done when I was a student! In all seriousness, there is a major gap between industry and academia when it comes to film, and we need to close it. On one hand there is an industry that is confronted by the paradigm shift of the internet and social media and on the other there is a relatively

Photo by Stephen Skok

LATER

PHOTOS: *The Ballad of Des & Mo* shoot underway in Melbourne. Below: Kate O'Toole (right) on the shoot with James Fair (centre).

Photo by Erminia Colucci

safe crowd of academics 'analysing the relationship'. Each side is suspicious of the other and both sides tend to hide behind their self-serving distinctions between 'art' and 'business'. Let's be blunt about it. If we want to become true knowledge economies,

THE LANGUAGE OF 'DO-IT-YOURSELF', 'INDEPENDENT', 'GUERRILLA' FILMMAKING IS GREAT IN THEORY, BUT IT IS A MYTH

there needs to be some original thinking. The Hollywood business model is under siege and we have new technologies that are capable of levelling the market. So let's innovate! Some critics argue that this is all wishful thinking, but I wish to point to some *evidence*. We've shot and edited two micro-budget feature length films in 72 hours, using tapeless camera technology and got one into the Audience Top Ten at the most important film festival in the Southern Hemisphere. That is what the MSc in Digital Feature Film Production is all about. Putting theories to the test and debunking the mythologies that we have inherited about filmmaking.

Taking a scientific approach to cinema doesn't sound very creative. Is that an unfair criticism?
That's the assumption isn't it? Film is more exciting if it is mythological and has external

qualities aside from the physicality of the technology. I completely agree. I am not advocating the fetishism of technology. I am arguing for the scientific exploration of film production, away from assumptions and mythologies that get peddled without consideration. Art and science are not mutually exclusive; think of Da Vinci and the Vitruvian Man or Fibonacci and the Golden Ratio. Patterns of repeatability and the reduction of uncertainty pester film studios as much today as they did a hundred years ago and we're adding new variables of social media and technological mediums all the time. Moore's Law dictates that technology doubles in capability and halves in price approximately every 18 months. This is the collision of science, art, business and maths! I think that merely studying theory is an uncreative process. Getting your hands dirty by testing and experimenting is far more fun!

You've proved that someone can make a film in 72 hours. So what?
The 72-hour projects were possible because the technology facilitated a new way of working for the filmmakers. We organised ourselves differently, we communicated

differently. This has huge ramifications for the ways that creative processes occur. For example, six people from all over the world worked on the script through an open source program and then a crew of forty volunteers turned up at a meeting after a Facebook campaign and offered their skills. If Jonathan Caouette created a storm for making a film about himself [*Tarnation*], by himself with no money, why isn't it equally important that a community can contribute to the production of a film in a similar fashion? My belief is that we want to hold on to the idea of the artist as individual and discovery as destiny. However, we are slowly beginning to identify the value of networks. I'd argue that this isn't all that new. But this doesn't fit the narratives we have been fed through mainstream film studies; directors as auteurs, actors as stars, etc. I don't believe any one person could shoot, edit and then screen a whole feature film by themselves in 72 hours. So I didn't prove that someone could make a film in 72 hours, we proved that a team could do it if they worked differently. The distinction is important. Film is a communicative medium, connecting and engaging audiences. The language of 'do-it-yourself', 'independent', 'guerrilla' filmmaking is great in theory, but it is a myth, and sharing it with people is far harder. Trust me, I've tried.

What comes next?
Creatively, I am devising a film project whereby I explore ways of making 125% demonstrable profit on investment. That's a challenge! Academically, I am working with Conor Murphy and Alan Fitzpatrick at Filmbase to ensure the Staffordshire University MSc in Digital Feature Film Production is successfully launched from Filmbase in September. We see it as developing a pathway for aspiring and existing filmmakers to get their skills accredited and recognised at an advanced postgraduate level while still fully engaged in the practice of filmmaking. If we are going to be serious about filmmaking, we need to be making films, not just reading and writing about them.