

# Term Paper

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ICS 2102

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# DIY Filmmaking Culture

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This essay is my response to term paper option four, which instructs me to consider my media journal and analyze my use of and exposure to media. My unedited media journal was close to thirty pages long, as I felt obliged to record *everything* that I did, at least initially, and while I accept my edited version as an accurate reflection of my media experiences, it consists of only a fraction of what I am exposed to on a weekly or even daily basis. My time spent on the computer is an exercise in divided attention: I move seamlessly from window to window, juggling software like Sony Vegas, Firefox, iTunes, and Microsoft Word without giving much thought to what I am doing; and I can respond to an e-mail, change a music track selection, or render a video without catching my breath. I learned how to edit using Sony Vegas almost exclusively from video based tutorials; many of the short films that I watch online are produced by fledgling filmmakers or fans, such as *The Wizard* mash-up; and after I finish playing a PC game, I actively seek out fan modifications (mods) to extend my gaming experience, e.g., *Bioshock* and its lack of correct widescreen support.

This is the reality of living in a media saturated environment, and so the difficulty of detecting connections between media should come as no surprise; however, once I identified a thematic interest such as filmmaking, it was relatively painless to tease out the threads that held seemingly divergent forms of content together. In his examination of participatory culture, Jenkins (2003) discusses the empowerment of would-be filmmakers because of the affordability of camcorders and digital cameras. He argues that “the Web has become the digital refrigerator for the ‘Do-It-Yourself’ (‘DIY’) movement,” allowing amateur filmmakers “to gain greater visibility and to move beyond localized publics into much broader circulation.” Of course Jenkins is primarily interested in the fan appropriation of media content, but according to Dena (2008a), who has augmented Jenkins's definition of participatory culture, audiences now have the ability to “co-create, filling in gaps left intentionally or unintentionally by the primary producer,” (p. 41) and are moving away from participation with the producer's content.

While the DIY movement encapsulates far more than just filmmaking, I am fascinated by how the DIY ethic has been applied to film production and distribution, and how the patterns of my media use are

embedded in the community of zero-budget filmmakers, whether it is for the purposes of my own education or merely for entertainment. Sujewa Ekanayake (2006) writes the following about the DIY filmmaking movement on his blog:

*DIY filmmaking & distro is: low budget film production & distribution where the filmmaker or a collection of filmmakers have the final say in all significant creative & business decisions regarding a project, and where the filmmaker(s) also physically do most or all of the production & distribution work.*

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There is nothing new to this approach to creative production; Ekanayake looks to '80s hardcore punk bands for the beginnings of the DIY movement, while Jenkins considers the photocopier as a starting point in the history of participatory culture. In terms of self-sufficiency, it is absurd to limit ourselves to the twentieth century, but in this essay I am referring to a unique kind of participatory culture that is grounded in patterns of media consumption and the sharing of resources in a way that was not possible before the invention new media technologies.

My exposure to DIY filmmaking began with Robert Rodriguez's book *Rebel without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker With \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player*. Inspired, as I was, by Rodriguez, filmmaker Benjamin Morgan writes:

*I read his book Rebel Without a Crew, and decided right then and there that I was going to adopt his game plan: produce three no-budget films, spend no money, learn as much [I] can, then set out to produce a film intended for theatrical release.*

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Morgan followed Rodriguez's game plan, writing and directing *Quality of Life*. Like Rodriguez, he also found a way to communicate his experiences, engaging in an innovative form of self-distribution that aims to capitalize on interested members of the DIY filmmaking community by offering a 216 page DIY primer that details Morgan's experiences making his film.

At the time I read *Rebel Without a Crew* I did not have a supportive local community or a sufficient number of friends interested in filmmaking to pursue what most saw as a risky endeavor. More recently, websites have been popping up all over the place to provide DIY filmmaking instruction through video, photos, and articles. This is something that I tried to do several years ago with Film Initiative, a now

defunct website that I co-created to reach out to amateur filmmakers in Halifax, Nova Scotia who were interested in collaborating on productions. I managed to get some interviews and develop a sense of what the indie film industry was like in the Maritimes, but I failed to capitalize on the filmmaking community to the extent that I had hoped.

Websites like [Indy Mogul](#) are fulfilling a need for community based solutions to problems typical of financially strapped projects. [DVXuser](#) offers the same thing in a different package, though it does not take advantage of Web 2.0 (collaboration and information sharing) technologies to the extent that Indy Mogul does, instead preferring to house its community in a conventional forum. While both websites are useful to the DIY filmmaking community, DVXuser, due to professional affiliations, can give the impression to budding filmmakers that money is necessary to solve most filmmaking problems. This illustrates one of the divisions within the DIY filmmaking community. DVXuser subscribers are not exclusively interested in making films as a personal art form. Many of the users are video enthusiasts rather than filmmaking enthusiasts, purchasing expensive prosumer cameras for projects that will never see the light of day and endlessly arguing over which camera is the best. A parallel would be the subset of the Information Technology (IT) community that fetishizes computers, upgrading on a monthly basis for graphical or processing power that is beyond their needs. This form of technology fetishism is referred to by Christopher Harris (2006) as a “misguided approach that centers on technology as an object or subject rather than a tool,” and it is the antithesis of the “folk-culture understanding of creativity” that Jenkins (2003) refers to because it necessarily limits creation to those that possess significant financial resources. This is not to say that purchasing better equipment is somehow deviant, but losing sight of its intended use is problematic and ultimately self-defeating.

The prevalence of affordable DV cameras “allows filmmakers to take greater creative risks ... shifting power from financiers to filmmakers, who no longer need their money, permission, or approval” (Broderick, 1999). Dena (2008b) argues that “the future will not be the domain of artists who adapt or extend from their primary medium, but the domain of people who are transmedia artists from the beginning. Filmmakers don’t create films anymore, they create worlds.” Filmmaker Lance Weiler has taken this message seriously, forming [The Workbook Project](#), the goal of which is “to create a free

resource for content creators that will become a user contributed repository of information.” A glance at its content tells us a bit more than this vague mission statement: it is a community based website for DIY culture, focusing primarily on filmmaking, but also embracing cross-media productions.

Dogme 95 has been a source of inspiration for DIY filmmakers like Weiler, who shot *The Last Broadcast* on a budget of less than a thousand dollars (Henkel, 1999). Dogme was started by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995 as a way to counter technology’s replacement of truth with illusion. Ironically, the movement has been characterized by an embrace of technology in the form of consumer DV cameras, e.g., Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* (Dogme #1), which was shot using a Sony PC7 (Rosenbaum, 1998). Dogme “means creativity (and new-found freedom) through restraint” (as cited in Schlosser, 2000), and in the spirit of this restraint there are an accompanying set of rules, most of which are acceptable, such as shooting only on location with no additional sound or music, but the requirement of the 35mm format places Dogme out of reach for most DIY filmmakers.

A more recent movement is known as mumblecore. Hoberman (2007) writes that mumblecore movies “are disarmingly pragmatic, full of abrupt cuts and choppy inserts. Acting is mainly a coping mechanism.” Mumblecore films eschew genre, focus on relationships, and offer “severely naturalistic portraits of the life and loves of artistic twentysomethings” (Swanberg, 2007). I think of mumblecore as an upgrade from Dogme 95 due to its embrace of the Web as a self-distribution platform and lack of reliance on arbitrary rules. Some critics have a dim view of the movement, such as Taubin (2007), who has traditionally been supportive of independent filmmakers. She waves her hand goodbye at “the indie movement that never was more than a flurry of festival hype and blogosphere branding,” raising the hackles of passionate bloggers such as Smith (2007), who writes:

*[O]nly in Taubin’s insular, privileged world (one, frankly, I’d like to be a part of) could mumblecore count as some kind of overwhelming ‘film movement,’ one which she inexplicably feels compelled to note has nothing on ‘the French New Wave or the postwar American avant-garde.’*

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Hudson (2007) chimes in as well:

*Many of the criticisms leveled over this entire year at the loose bunch of films tumbling, willingly or not, into the ‘mumblecore’ bucket are well worth taking*

*seriously; that won't happen if we go rushing out into the night, torches held high, looking for a straw man.*

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The comments to Hudson's blog post are particularly interesting because when they are not discussing the production values of mumblecore films, they are talking about hype and marketing. One commenter points out that mumblecore was not created by filmmakers, instead blaming the journalists that decided that this was an important movement. I consider mumblecore, like Dogme 95, part of the larger movement of DIY filmmaking, so I am not terribly concerned with how others are responding to it. If it is a journalistic construction, I think someone has missed the point of what has been happening over the past ten to fifteen years.

This essay has discussed participatory culture and the DIY movement before analyzing some of the major trends I have identified in my media journal. The brief case studies that I have included here are my way of emphasizing how participatory culture manifests itself in different "bodies," from Robert Rodriguez to transmedia artists like Lance Weiler. I discussed mumblecore last because it is firmly set in the mid-2000s, and I anticipate another transition period because of websites like Indy Mogul, which are equipped to provide an access point for aspiring DIY filmmakers. Perhaps the The Workbook Project will also contribute something to these new forms of participatory culture, especially with regard to the development of community based initiatives for regional filmmakers. Mumblecore is not unlike Dogme 95, or if we go back further, the French New Wave, in that creative people are still struggling to find new ways to interact with what is essentially a commodified cultural product, and the tools might finally be available for them to turn back to that folk understanding of culture and demand the "right to participate in the creation and distribution of media narratives" (Jenkins, 2003).

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