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Starring in a movie directed by you may become a reality thanks to the camera

Californian garage cinema guru is on a mission to bring media to the masses, writes **Karlin Lillington**

Ever secretly yearned to be a movie director, bossing those narcissistic, highly-strung actors around and watching a world take shape through the camera lens? Now you've got a friend in the business. Prof Marc Davis wants to bring movies to the masses, and by that he doesn't mean to big audiences sitting passively in darkened theatres. He wants to put everyone – and he means everyone, from your grandmother to the kid next door – behind the camera, in front of the lens and in the cutting room.

"Make a movie in five minutes" is his slogan. "If you can breathe, you can be in a movie," he barks.

Prof Davis, an assistant professor at the University of California at Berkeley, talks fast and furious and is passionate about giving the average Joe or Jill the capabilities to make and edit all types of media, from music to film.

At Berkeley, he is running a project called "garage cinema" ("The reference is like, garage bands, to localised content, anyone can do it.")

It's rough and ready as well, and that's partly the point. In Dublin recently to speak to an audience at Media Lab Europe about ways of revolutionising broadcast media, Prof Davis explained in an interview afterward that what he is really interested in is the notion of "metadata" – sets of data that can be re-used in multiple ways and manipulated by intelligent media production tools.

"How can we really change media production so that we can really simplify it?" he asks. His answer is that intelligence should start to reside in, say, the camera you use to film something, rather than your head. It could know how to coax the best shot out of you – or to persuade you into standing or moving in the right way if you're the one being filmed.

Right now, he says, most cameras are large, complex pieces of equipment and a source of bafflement to the average consumer. But imagine a camera that coaches you through the steps, then can recognise the good shots it has captured from the blurred or wrongly angled ones.

You might think you'd then have a nice set of photos or videos, but for Prof Davis, that's only the beginning. "We want to make the regular consumer, who may have no talent at all, make a good movie," he explains – a fairly daunting task, it would seem.

But he shows a set of short films to demonstrate what he's talking about.

In one clip, a movie camera talks a man through doing a

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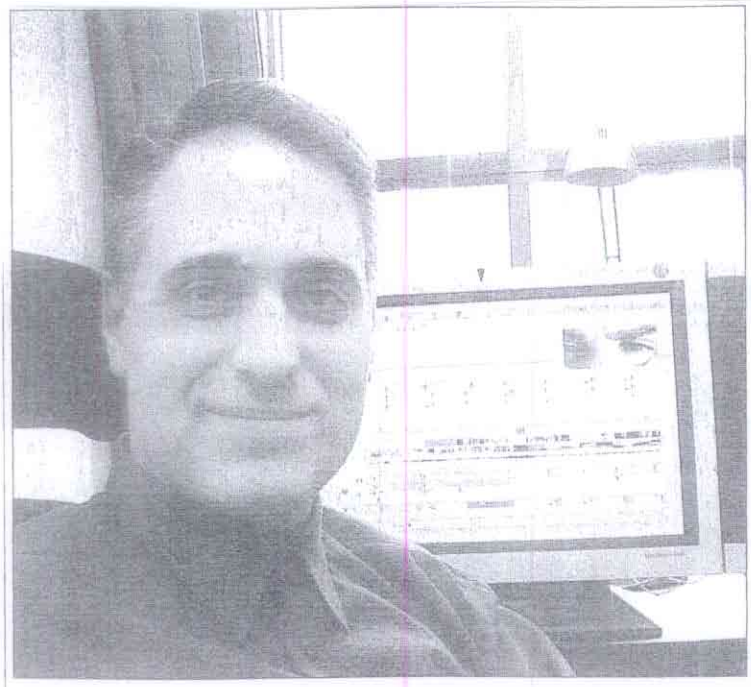

Prof Marc Davis: He wants to put everyone behind the camera, in front of the lens and in the cutting room. "Make a movie in five minutes" is his slogan. "If you can breathe, you can be in a movie."

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number of easy actions – smiling, screaming, turning slowly toward the camera. Once the camera obtains a number of satisfactory "captures", those bits become the metadata. "And once I have the metadata, then I have something that can be used in a number of ways."

His examples are both fun and funny.

He shows a well-known US television advertisement for a telecommunications company that ends with an image of a rollercoaster. Now, he shows how the screaming man clip could be spliced into the rollercoaster shot, to make an instant, personalised advertisement.

He also shows a popular trailer for the film *Terminator II* – except the android that slowly rotates towards the screen at the end of the advertisement now has the face of the slowly rotating man.

Advertisers are desperate to get people to sit through their advertisements, but new digital technology is making it possible to slice out the advertisements, even as a show is being broadcast, Prof Davis says.

Why not make clever advertisements that could be replayed endlessly at home, that could pull consumers in so that they actually become part of the advertisement?

But take that even further.

Why not allow people to become characters in a programme, to be spliced in as unobtrusive extras? Or to make their own music videos, by teaching the camera to synchronise the action in a video clip with the beat of a song automatically?

Coming digital technologies make such notions feasible as well. Indeed, the possibility of merging the consumer with television is what sparked off Prof Davis's interest in this sort of "garage cinema" to begin with.

He grew up in Los Angeles and "thought of television as a place with real characters. I wanted to be in the box, dancing with Bugs Bunny", he says. An obsession with media brought him to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as a student, working with streaming media (live broadcasts of media that can be played in real time over a medium such as the internet).

He left MIT to work on the core technologies of media automation, he says, working for Interval, a start-up funded by Microsoft co-founder Mr Paul Allen, then moving on to a Silicon Valley start-up experimenting in the area of broadband content.

The downturn, and the slower-than-expected take-up of broadband, meant the company folded and he took his industry experience back into academia, at Berkeley.

He'd like to see media begin to follow the pattern most consumer products have followed – going from highly customised products (as with the first automobiles, only a few people could have them) to mass production (as with the Ford) to an era of mass customisation, with intelligent media and metadata.

For that transition to happen, media companies – the suppliers of film, video, music and television – will themselves have to go through their own revolution.

Right now, the companies increasingly see consumers as potential enemies, people who steal their copyrighted digital content through the easy copy and distribution mechanism of home computers.

"You could have a market for fans to integrate with the content. But media companies would have to think of consumers as sources and not just consumers of content," says Prof Davis.

Merging with your television might seem outlandish. But media companies willing to free their content for intentional manipulation? That might be the biggest conceptual leap of all.