Researching Creative Practice: Terminology, Policy, Models

Editorial

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In their introduction to *Mind the Gap!* (the conference proceedings of a series of papers delivered by practice-based researchers in the National College of Art and Design in Dublin in 2015) Desmond Bell and Rod Stoneman observe:

> while practice-based research towards a doctorate in the creative arts has been established now for over twenty years, a series of recurring and unresolved debates around this mode of scholarship continue to resonate with our arts schools, departments of music, drama and the performing arts and media and communications studies. (15)

They go on to identify several problematic issues including the relationship between theory and practice; the balance of written and practical elements for doctoral students; the onus on the student to produce industry-standard outputs alongside rigorous scholarly theses; the nature of the viva; and the afterlife for the practical outputs. Crucially, they focus on the "distinctive character of reflective and professionally based knowledge within the academy" (15). Like traditional academic endeavour, creative practice is inextricably linked to a "unique contribution to knowledge" (Batty and Kerrigan, "Introduction" 10). However, "within the ordered world of bibliographically based humanities research, the studio or field often seems a messy place prone to excesses of subjective enthusiasm, creative instinct, intuition […] and sheer chaos" (Bell 182). In spite of the challenges of defining and assessing creative practice, the model is being adopted in a widespread fashion as universities take in PhD students from (or wishing to enter) industry, to conduct academic research in the arts. This movement challenges the perceived superiority of information gleaned from textual or archival analysis and suggests that knowledge may now be generated in and through the production of artworks. As Angela Piccini and Caroline Rye suggest, "[p]ractice-led research formalizes the institutional acceptance of art-practices and processes as arenas in which knowledges might be produced" (37). It is with this context in mind that this issue of *Alphaville* engages with the tensions and opportunities associated with the rapidly expanding area of academic production.

There is a growing body of work on the practicalities, philosophies, methodologies and forms of assessment of creative practice. One of the most recent publications, *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan, helpfully narrows that focus to film and media and, as a result, it is a unique and powerful volume that has been cited often in this issue; it is also appropriate that it is the subject of a detailed review by Rod Stoneman. This study has built on previous work that has often

straddled the disciplines of film, media and cultural studies alongside the performing and visual arts. For instance, Paul Carter's *Material Thinking* (2004) explores a range of artistic collaborations to consider the intersection of practice and theory in an attempt to provide an intellectual underpinning to the burgeoning field of creative practice. Robin Nelson's *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2007) offers a useful guide for PhD students engaging in practical projects with case studies from art, film and video, creative writing and dance, proposing that "artistic practice be viewed as the production of knowledge or philosophy in action" (Barrett 1). Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean's *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2009) addresses creative practice as an exciting and innovative development in higher education, and articulates one of the main aims of the book: to accelerate recognition of the validity of creative practice as a form of research. It also provides international case studies in the disciplines of creative writing, dance, music, theatre, film and new media. *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen* (2009) explores a diversity of relevant topics: methodologies, documentation, creative economies, performance, digital archives, peer review and ethics (Fuschini et al.). The book, accompanied by a DVD, includes contributions from over forty practitioner-researchers and it remains a significant contribution to the field. Graeme Sullivan's second edition of *Art Practice as Research* (2010) offers a rich and rigorous discussion of visual arts research from a contextual, theoretical and practical perspective. It is interesting to note that, in his endorsement on the book's cover, Howard Gardner evokes F. Scott Fitzgerald's claim that "the test of a 'first-rate intelligence' is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind and still retain the ability to function". It is in straddling the gaps that Gardner identifies between "art and science, mind and body, research and practice, teaching and doing, traditional and postmodern views of education and of art, and creative and critical thinking" that we might begin to do justice to a conceptualisation of what research might be in an ever-changing, deeply contested modern academy. Phillip McIntyre's *Creativity and Cultural Production* (2012) examines creativity from social, bio-psychological and cultural perspectives, exploring creative practice in radio, journalism, television, film, photography and music.

Robin Nelson's *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (2013) raises important questions on how creative practice is framed and assessed offering a range of case studies from the performing arts which are also useful starting points for consideration of the position of screen production as research, particularly in relation to the tension between arts practices and more traditional forms of academic output. Nelson makes a strong case for a "shift in established thinking about what constitutes research and knowledge" (8), a leap of faith required from many who still believe in a time "when there were arts practices, on the one hand, and 'academic research' on the other" (3). *The Creative System in Action* adopts a systems approach to explore creative practices in music, journalism, writing, film, theatre, the arts, design and digital media (McIntyre et al.).

The studies listed above are a snapshot of the type of work being done in the wider creative arts, and it is also important to note the significance of *Media Practice and Education* (explored in more detail in Julian McDougall's article in this issue) and *Screenworks* (the peer-reviewed online journal of creative practice which hosts a range of film and media projects, along with open-access reviews of the work). These journals share cutting-edge projects and case studies with the academic community and operate as important fora for discussion on the assessment of creative practice as an intellectual pursuit.

In addition, two reports have been produced by the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association: an initial scoping study on *Screen Production Research*

Reporting (Batty and Glisovic), followed by recommendations on *Measuring Excellence in Screen Production Research* (Batty et al.). The reports explored definitions of NTROs (Non-Traditional Research Outputs) suggesting that a "screen work must contain, embody or perform research findings in order to qualify as a research output. […] The film (creative work) must contribute new ideas and/or practices to provide evidence as an outcome of research" (Batty et al. 2). In terms of assessing an artwork, it was recommended that an accompanying written statement should outline its research background, contribution and significance and that this statement should be theoretically rigorous and analytical rather than descriptive. It was also recommended that academic publications should be developed from the screen work as books or journal articles with recognised academic publishers.

A further project was instigated as an investigation into filmmaking practices in Australia and the UK. Developed by Joanna Callaghan and Susan Kerrigan, The Filmmaking Research Network (FRN) was funded by a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Networking Scheme grant. The FRN identified seven modes of filmmaking production defined as follows: professional practice; interdisciplinary; documentary; fiction; essay films; screenwriting; and digital media hybrid works. Crucially, the Network found that currently "many films produced in academia attempt to fit within industry models that are largely hostile to the characteristics of academic research outputs" ("Strands"). As a result, much depends on identifying and targeting niche audiences for academic outputs. As well as coordinating a range of events and producing publications on academic creative practice, the Network also hosts two very useful resources on its website: a register of films made within academia and a database of potential examiners of creative practice, categorised by topic. It is heartening to see this expansion of resources to assist the evolution and assessment of creative practice in the academy.

In Ireland, IMBAS operates as a forum for "artists and scholars working within and beyond the university sector who share an interest in arts practice research". While the organisation has a particular focus on the performing arts, it has shown a willingness to broaden its scope to include film and video works. This is significant as IMBAS engages in interinstitutional policy development at a national level. These are some examples of the willingness of academics and practitioners to develop this field through providing opportunities for networking and policy development.

Defining Screen Practice

Callaghan and Kerrigan define filmmaking research as pushing "at the boundaries of both industry filmmaking and traditional research methodologies and methods by adopting unique approaches to professional and critical practices pursuing forms of content creation that might otherwise fall outside of industry production modes and dissemination, where commercial exigencies dominate" (230). They suggest that there are four potential outputs within this framework: the use of moving images to investigate technological advancements (in health sciences or information technology, for example); as a vehicle for dissemination of research findings; as a form of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research in collaborative projects; and, finally, as a practice-as-research approach whereby the filmmaking process is an inherent part of the research project (as, for example, in ethnographical or participatory documentary) (230–231).

Figure 1: Dissemination of research. *Éire na Nuachtscannán* (*Ireland in the Newsreels*).
Mac Dara Ó'Curraidhín, TG4, 2017. Screenshot with link to video excerpt.

I found this definition helpful in contextualising my own academic work in the area of film history and archival research. I recently worked as screenwriter and associate producer of *Éire na Nuachtscannán*, a six-part series, funded by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, which has been screened three times on Irish language broadcaster TG4. The series was based on my book *Ireland in the Newsreels*, which had been adapted from my PhD thesis, a traditional archival study of the representations of Ireland in cinema newsreels between 1910 and the 1950s. In doing this, I learned skills I can now draw upon in teaching and supervising students of both theory and practice: I learned how to write and tailor treatments for specific broadcasters and their expected audiences; I learned how to format scripts and conduct interviews; how to negotiate rates with archives; how to edit interviews, archival material and newly shot footage; how to work with a director and commissioning editor and, crucially, how to adapt academic research in a form appropriate to the general public. This generated new knowledge for me which will be useful in teaching and future research projects, but the project did not advance a central research question *within* and *through* the practice. Therefore, this type of project falls within the second category outlined above by Callaghan and Kerrigan: that of dissemination of research findings. Indeed, the series was broadcast in a primetime slot and, therefore, the original research reached a much wider audience through exhibition on television than would traditionally be associated with a specialist academic text. Dissemination of research findings is perhaps on the conservative end of what might be possible through models of academic practice; the rest of this *Alphaville* issue, however, offers several examples of creative practice covering all of Callaghan and Kerrigan's categories in exciting and experimental ways.

The Modern Academic Landscape

This issue addresses the value and pursuit of creative practice from a variety of perspectives. Rod Stoneman, having worked at the top of both academia and the creative

industries, is well poised to contextualise the uneasy relationship between the two realms. He has outlined in his foreword the industrialised university as a place where there is an endemic inequality in promotional structures and an ever-increasing set of expectations of academics in teaching, research and administration. As Stoneman asserts in his foreword, this "tyranny of metrics" distorts contributions to knowledge, stifles creativity and celebrates the commodification of scholarly outputs and the consumerisation of students (13). This is a world where academics in the arts are now expected to chase highly competitive funding grants to demonstrate their worthiness. In the mid-nineteenth century, John Newman's ideal university was one that espoused a "culture of the intellect" (7), offering students a chance to develop a talent for "philosophical speculation" (8) which in turn helped graduates to better understand the politics, hierarchies and injustices of the social order. In the twenty-first-century neoliberal university, academics are less valued as the purveyors of ideas and rather encouraged to bring in more money than they cost and serve the needs of students as consumers first and thinkers second.

In this issue's opening article, Julian McDougall reflects on his extensive career building and evolving media practice discourse. He considers the terminology of media practice suggesting that a research output can be differentiated as practice-based or practice-led depending on the order in which the research is undertaken. Significantly, he suggests that, "[o]n the question of what practice as research should look, sound or feel like, the answer is that it should be different to what it would have looked, sounded or felt like before it came into the academy" (33). In this process, McDougall highlights the importance of adopting an appropriate methodology and demonstrating a willingness to reflect upon this methodology as a crucial part of academic practice. The written output and practical component should emerge simultaneously in order to "avoid any sense that the practice is only data collection of sorts" (33). McDougall also explores the associated publication of creative practice outputs with reference to *Media Practice and Education* and the *Disrupted Journal of Media Practice* suggesting that these platforms have interrogated the notions of pedagogy and written critique in relation to contextualising practice within the academy. McDougall defines a set of principles for media practice research, emphasising that, although practice may take many forms, it is essential within an academic context that it should be original, significant and rigorous.

Emancipation and Recuperation

Alejandro Pedregal and Miguel Errazu consider the political impetus of creative practice and its potential as an agent of change. Drawing upon Third Cinema as a model, they suggest that current art practice should orient itself towards a process of intellectual critique in order to understand social struggles and challenges. Through producing artwork that is inherently political, there is room for academic practice to instigate radical social change, one that reflects inequalities and injustices as a means of transforming cultural hierarchies. The article deconstructs dominant thinking on four thematic areas: experimentation, temporality, the public sphere, and institutionalism. Through the adoption of a "Third Cinema politics" Errazu and Pedregal make a strong case for the emancipatory potential of the arts both within and outside the academy.

Romana Turina examines how creative practice can explore marginalised histories in order to reconsider dominant media representations of the past. Using the politically contested space of the port of Trieste as a case study, Turina illuminates how creative practice can

recuperate silenced historical accounts and raise questions about former conflict that have resonance for contemporary audiences. Turina outlines how cinema acts as a powerful force for transmitting, cementing and challenging personal and collective memories. Employing autoethnography as a methodology, Turina explores how the mining of archival material and personal experiences can produce an artistic account of forgotten voices. Her practice is based on sturdy historical analysis and detailed critique of a range of dominant media forms (fiction films and newsreels, for example). Her account of her position as a researcher with a deep personal connection to her topic highlights the tension between private and public histories and illuminates how creative practice can offer nuanced critique in its contribution to this discourse.

Gonzalo de Lucas and Carolina Sourdis consider the creation of the essay film as a methodology, informed by a theoretical framework, that produces creative outputs which embody a thoughtful and intellectual approach to filmmaking. De Lucas and Sourdis suggest that the unique (albeit diverse) form of the essay film operates as a nexus between film and theory. Thus, the essay film becomes an ideal model of academic creative practice as it embodies the knowledge generated by a process of research in both the content and form of the finished film. The creative output both documents and transmits the ideas explored through theoretical consideration and can also act pedagogically to encourage the viewer to analyse the process of production. Ultimately, the essay film offers a self-reflexive space within which the filmmaker critiques while creating.

Models and Methodologies

Acclaimed filmmaker Jill Daniels also discusses self-reflexivity and the use of the subjective voice in her work. She explores five of her films, all of which touch on memory, place and trauma and considers how each concept is subject to unreliability, and can be further problematised in association with a personal approach. Daniels's articulation of her process sheds light on the intellectual aspect of academic screen production, and she highlights access to research time as one of the most valuable aspects of working within the academy. Crucially, she also suggests that the academic environment is more conducive to experimentation and potential failure than the mainstream film and television industry. Her thoughtful analysis evidences how personal, academically inflected work can "provide rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world" (101). Given the fact that she has been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards and that her work is regularly selected for high-profile festivals, Daniels is an excellent example of how academic practice can reach wider public audiences, as well as the traditional academic reader through journal articles and book publication and, in fact, she has just published *Memory, Place and Autobiography: Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking*.

Sandra Gaudenzi reflects upon her role in the development of the WHAT IF IT methodology which emerged from a series of developmental workshops under the auspices of Interactive Factual (IF) Lab. A series of international practitioners was encouraged to examine and develop their creative practices in order to move from linear narratives to interactive coproduction with their audiences or "users/inter-actors". The methodology draws upon a structured process, asking the designer to consider "WHAT" is their concept and then to Iterate it, Formulate it, Ideate, and prototype and Test (WHAT IF IT). Gaudenzi's action research concludes that assisting content producers to develop their ideas with this structured process in mind redirected creative pursuits from authorial intent to a stronger consideration of user needs and potential coproduction with viewers/audiences.

Alexandra Colta considers the precarious nature of film festival curation and programming. By exploring the ethical context of human rights documentary programming, Colta examines the responsibilities of curators to audiences, filmmakers and themselves. The issue of emotional labour is used as a means of investigating the emotional toll taken on programmers who often work as volunteers or casual staff, yet take on the burden of viewing challenging and upsetting material, often with temporal intensity. Equally significant is the fact that individuals and teams working for festivals take on moral responsibility for the discourse sparked by material that is often divisive or controversial. Colta notes that there is a self-reflexive movement towards standardising these practices, but highlights that this remains ad hoc and largely unregulated.

In an article outlining processes associated with Research through Design (RtD), Alan Hook explores the importance of speculation in the creation of practice-based artifacts employing VR and AR. Challenging the dominance of humans in the human/nonhuman animal hierarchy, he suggests that speculative design offers a politically charged means of exploring the notion of corporeal experience across different types of bodies. These exploratory speculative spaces, Hook suggests, can foster a new kind of interspecies understanding and that this is the inherent knowledge generated through the process of creative practice. Hook argues that this knowledge is embodied in "things" rather than through language and uses his project *Equine Eyes* as a case study to demonstrate how the creation of a horse's head to be worn by a human can generate new understanding by the practitioner (and users) of nonhuman sensory interaction with the world.

In addition to these explorations of various models of creative practice, this issue also includes a dossier of case studies that is largely (but not exclusively) focused on PhD projects, a significant area of interest for both academic departments and industry practitioners considering doctoral study. As Davide Abbatescianni and Dan O'Connell explain in their introduction to the dossier, the five case studies included demonstrate the hybridity and possibilities of creative practice forms alongside a consideration of the challenges faced by practitioners in navigating the terrain of academia. Several of the contributors to the dossier and the current issue participated in a creative practice symposium hosted by the Department of Film and Screen Media, University College Cork in May 2018. A roundtable discussion between symposium delegates on the opportunities and challenges associated with academic practice was recorded and has been included as this issue's podcast. It is fitting that as well as the usual book reviews and reports, the issue also includes a review article on a particularly topical creative practice project in Ryan Shand's illuminating critique of *It Stays with You: Use of Force by UN Peacekeepers in Haiti* (Cahal McLaughlin and Siobhán Willis, 2017).

Challenges and Opportunities

Jill Daniels mentions a sequence in her film *Journey to the South* "in which the villagers depicted talking at a social event eye the camera suspiciously before turning away" (12). Similarly, Sourdis and de Lucas mention a problematic sequence in their exploration of the essay film as methodology when two women in a Polish café in Tel Aviv, discomfited by a voyeuristic invasion into their conversation, move seats to shield their faces from filmmaker David Perlov's camera. These two instances of unwanted viewing also evoke the unwanted scrutiny that academic screen practice may impose on its subjects. The film and media industries have always been suspicious of scholarly scrutiny, particularly since it inevitably

exposes the commercial processes at the heart of production. What media tycoon wants the average consumer to believe that they are being manipulated by all the glossy artifice of the culture industry? Would Edward Bernays's development of the strategies of public relations have been as effective if countless individuals were aware of the fact that they were being manipulated toward smoking or other behaviours that facilitated conspicuous consumption (Tye 23–50)? Equally, television broadcasters and film funders see academic researchers as a threatening force ready to critique their operations, procedures and, crucially, their content, which is geared primarily toward conspicuous entertainment. Academic scrutiny may expose the fact that those responsible for producing audiovisual cultural forms are often more preoccupied with a healthy bottom line rather than producing enlightening material. How will academic practice differ in its content and form? While the philosophy of John Reith, the first Director-General of the BBC might be considered by some as outdated and conservative, particularly in an age when there is an ever-expanding range of platforms to consider, perhaps academic practice may still embody the Reithian objective "to inform, educate and entertain" and in doing so, occupy a space that mainstream media prefer not to fill. Reith defined broadcasting as a "servant of culture" suggesting that "it is better to overestimate the mentality of the public than to underestimate it" (Briggs 55). To generalise, while most mainstream media prioritise entertainment rather than information or education, this offers an opportunity for academic creative practice to fill this space with content that is replete with specialist research and provocative ideas for audiences who may be open to this material.

Equally, the academy's responsibility to interrogate film and media's place in modern society is more important than ever and now that interrogation may take the form of production as well as traditional critique. This movement toward practice offers a chance to show those who produce mainstream film and media alternative versions of cultural forms. Now academics may not just highlight the gaps, they may fill them with their own intellectually infused art forms. Academic practice may now be consumed in different ways. How will the mainstream industry react to this? Probably like the villagers in *Journey to the South*, or the unwilling coffee drinkers in the Polish café. The industry is still plagued with problems due to its lack of diversity, its financial and sexual corruption, its precarity and its hierarchies. In this context the industry *must* be scrutinised and it is through this process that there may be room for new partnerships and genuine reform. Just as Alan Hook outlines the magical potential of speculative design, with a focus on imagined futures, so too Rod Stoneman highlights how the arts themselves can act as a locus for "imaginative speculation" about the future of humanity, both acting as a reminder of Newman's philosophical speculation as a core value of any university (15). Stoneman outlines how tangible manifestoes can be born from artistic discourse and practice in a variety of forms and, while he might pessimistically suggest that in relation to television, for example, even mavericks entering the industry eventually succumb to "gradual implicit institutional repositioning", perhaps the potential of partnerships between academia and industry may thwart the institutionalisation of the players in both worlds (16).

It is also important to remember the position of undergraduates in this discussion. In *Educating Filmmakers* Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman warn against the "needs of the existing culture industry to supply practitioners who will perpetuate the predominant orthodoxy", highlighting the fact that "some institutions have from time to time shown ambitions towards genuine innovation, striking out in different directions to encourage filmmakers possessing a desire to challenge and to change" (185). This vision should be at the core of the academic mission in relation to teaching academic practice. Petrie and Stoneman further develop this idea: "[t]he only basis on which to develop a politicized aesthetic in teaching and in professional practice is precise understanding of existent media forms and how

they operate", suggesting that academic teachers "have the opportunity to nurture seeds of curiosity, enquiry and dissent which can help criticize received ideas and eventually to question and undermine dominant forms" (210).

The academy should remain a site of intellectual and social revolution, and creative practice, in the way it may potentially revolutionise academic outputs, is part of this ongoing struggle. In this context, academic practice must remain a rigorous, politicised, rebellious and above all, cerebral pursuit.

The diversity and interdisciplinarity of the projects and methodologies outlined above testify to the vibrancy of creative practice. There are of course areas that are calling out for more research: fictional filmmaking, innovative forms of broadcast television or web content and the production of archival material are all in need of further investigation and development. In addition, perhaps it is important to remember that there is a significant need in the burgeoning field of academic practice to develop robust and appropriate means of assessing intellectual rigour and encouraging parity of esteem in relation to other disciplines. To do this, "confidence" is essential, as Erik Knudsen suggests:

> confidence to move amongst scientists, sociologists, archaeologists, philosophers, linguists—and so on—and be able to defend one's work as research of equal standing. As I have alluded, this necessitates us, as a media practice research community, being able to appropriate the established language of traditional research, reshape and mould it to the way we explore as artists, and then use this evolved research language to help ourselves, and others, feel, see hear and perhaps even understand our contribution to knowledge, no matter how tacit that knowledge might be. (137–138)

Similarly, Julian McDougall calls for traditional scholars of film and media to embrace creative practice, so that practitioners are no longer operating in a space associated with

> diverse voices as "other" to science and knowledge, always the extra meeting, the AOB agenda item, the smaller funding pot, the poorly attended workshop. In this way, media practice research is subject to long-standing cultural hierarchies, but a curious example of successful divide and rule politics is exemplified by, for example, media and cultural studies researchers—themselves denied legitimation by both scientific and public discourses—undervaluing media practice research, failing to recognise the direct correspondence between this form of inequality and those they are keenly attuned to. (27)

In an increasingly competitive academic environment, creative practice becomes a scapegoat for perceived falling standards of research. In Jungian terms, traditional academic researchers fall prey to their "shadow" and project the imagined concerns about validity levelled at them by scientists onto their fellow researchers who chose to generate knowledge through practice. Jung identified that "patients who cannot admit certain moral defects in themselves project them upon the analyst, calmly assuming […] that he is more or less deficient morally" (235). This Jungian identification of weakness elsewhere as an unconscious projection of the inferiority of the self is often manifest in academic behaviours: the professor who belittles a PhD student in their field at a conference because they are concerned that their own research is no longer adequate or relevant; the peer reviewer who outlines weaknesses in the work of others that they are guilty of in their own writing; the colleague who complains about the laziness of others even though they consistently fail to fulfil their own allocated

workload. This of course is a convenient riposte to those who denigrate creative practice as somehow unworthy of academic recognition, but just as the first scholars of film, media and television studies fought to establish the validity of their disciplines, so too the fight for recognition of creative practice continues towards an (optimistic?) future by building on the sturdy academic frameworks of theoretical critique and political debate. To return to Fitzgerald in drawing to a close, "[a]nd so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" in search of the "green light, the orgastic future", a tantalising imagined space which promises the same level of respectability afforded to traditional disciplines (such as film theory) vested, with enthusiasm, in creative practice (683).

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