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The Problem of Peer Review in Screen Production: Exploring Issues and Proposing Solutions

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Abstract

With traditional academic work, the process of peer review is seemingly clear – work is refereed as a way of gatekeeping ideas and research contributions, to ensure it is not publicly available until it has passed a test of rigour, originality, clarity and significance to the field. Those with assumed knowledge of the discipline are the said gatekeepers, tasked with assessing the work on the basis of disciplinary knowledge and general research expertise. This often rests on the notion that the research and knowledge are made explicit in the writing. This is problematic for non-traditional academic work, such as screen production and media art, because a key value in this kind of work is the ability to communicate implicitly and differently from what can be articulated within the parameters of written, academic language. This tension between implicit and explicit knowledge claims has been one source of difficulty for evaluating and therefore rewarding creative practice research.

In this paper, we draw on a recent gathering of screen production academics, the two-day *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the academy* festival and conference, to help us discuss the complexities of peer reviewing screen production works for the academy, and to help us point towards possible solutions. We focus specifically on where and in what form the articulation of research might happen to assist the peer reviewing process, where the common approach is to write a research statement that makes explicit the methodologies undertaken and the new knowledge being claimed. This has incited some protest from within the screen production community: for example, how do we account with language for the very thing that is in excess of language, the contribution that finds its unique place outside of language and within the moving image? We therefore also discuss the dialogic relationship between art and writing, and the kinds of relationality that might be created to help make room for the 'in-articulable'. In short, how research and new knowledge in a screen work might be illuminated, and how an academic peer might therefore evaluate it. We conclude by discussing an approach we are currently taking to develop an online, refereed publication for screen production works, the Sightlines Journal, in response to both the current literature on

the topic and the gathering of discipline academics. Given the various contexts in which these questions arise in relation to screen production research (during the writing of a PhD, in the examination process, and in professional environments), we address them accordingly as individual yet interwoven discussions driven by the shared need to find workable solutions to recurring problems.

Introduction

Filmmaking as a research practice is becoming more and more common within the Higher Education sector (Petkovic 2013), supported in Australia by the recognition of creative works as 'non-traditional research outputs' for the purposes of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) evaluation process. This promotes the ability of practitioners working in Australian universities to write screenplays, create digital media narratives and make films, for example, underpinned by and/or embodying research as a way of adding to the stock of knowledge and practice.

Compared to many other creative arts disciplines, however, Screen Production is still in its infancy in Australia when it comes to the articulation of what it means to conduct research through creative practice in a form inherent to the discipline (e.g., audiovisual work, screenplay). This can be evidenced by the ongoing debates within and across universities around what does and does not constitute 'research' in this discipline. This is especially apparent when it comes to national research evaluation processes (i.e., ERA) and the selection of works that will form the basis of a university's portfolio for peer review. At the same time, there is an increasing number of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidates making screen works as research artefacts, and an increasing number of research qualified staff who are finding ways to produce impressive screen works despite a lack of uniform recognition, not to mention time and funding.

The development of a research footprint in the discipline has been – and still is – hampered by the lack of recognised outlets/venues for the publication/exhibition of screen-based research works, and as a result, a difficulty in these works being accepted as research outputs by universities.[1] Universities and ERA have recognised a range of platforms for the publication of screen-based research works, such as broadcast television and particular

[1] This can result in the added problem of screen practitioners with a lesser research profile having fewer opportunities to be promoted and appointed to research leadership roles.

exhibition venues and institutions. As such, institutional lists of 'recognised' outlets have evolved in recent years, developed in conjunction with ERA guidelines for research and academic expertise. For example, selection into international film festival programmes is recognised as a screen-based 'publication' outcome for many universities, when it is accompanied by a research statement and evidence of peer selection. However, these types of outlet/platform are bound by particular commercial and curatorial imperatives - which are sometimes at odds with the notion of research – and that determine the kind of screen work that is accepted for exhibition or broadcast. We would like to propose that an alternative to these imperatives is needed in order to grow the screen production research discipline.

A core issue here is evaluation, or peer review. As we will go on to outline, a discussion around the peer review process of screen works is the next crucial step to take towards enabling more opportunities for research output, thus providing a more rigorous and sustained debate around issues facing the discipline and, ultimately, a more serious acknowledgement by the academy of Screen Production research. To put this into context, let us turn to a recent gathering of screen production academics.

In November 2014, RMIT University in association with the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA), hosted *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the academy*. A combined film festival and academic conference, it was designed to showcase the creative work of screen practitioners working in the academy, and attracted a wide range of works from around Australia and internationally.[2] The event highlighted the quality of screen works being produced within the academy, including short and feature fiction, feature and online documentary, and short and feature screenplays. In addition to screenings and paper presentations, three discussion panels were held in order that delegates could take part in debates deemed important to the discipline. Across these panels and also the event more broadly, lively discussions were generated around topics such as the role of the written text in evaluating screen works as research, the relationship between creative practice research and the mainstream production industry, and the place of creative practice researchers in the academy. *Sightlines* also highlighted the many difficulties faced by screen

[2] We received over 40 submissions in total from the UK, US, France, Finland and Japan. Amongst the Australian submissions we had academics from UTS, La Trobe, Macquarie, VCA, Flinders, Griffith, Curtin, ANU, UNSW, and RMIT.

practitioners in having their work recognised as research, including how their work is both funded and exhibited.[3]

Following *Sightlines*, it was decided to establish a pilot peer reviewed online 'journal' for screen works, taking the first round of submissions from the conference delegates. Previous and existing models were examined with a view to developing an approach to the evaluation and exhibition of creative research works for what is still an emerging discipline in Australia. We will report on the development of this online journal, discussing some of the key challenges we have faced in designing what is intended to be a rigorous system of peer review that works for both the academy and academics themselves. Drawing on discussions from the conference, subsequent email conversations with delegates, and an appraisal of extant models of peer review for screen works, we will highlight a number of issues and propose some ways that we have sought to move forward.

We will examine three key issues that are central to the issue of research evaluation in this field. The first is the problem of identifying the research in the creative work and the debate about whether this should be expressed through a written statement. Here we draw on experiences of PhD examination to highlight the advantages of a clear written explication of the research.

Discussions at *Sightlines* suggested that many (but not all) participants accepted that written text should be part of the research communication process, either for pragmatic institutional reasons or because it was felt to be the best means to identify and explicate the research in the work. Given this, we consider the issue of the relationship between a creative work and an accompanying written text. Using Walter Benjamin's theory on translation (1968), we argue for a relationship between screen work and written text that illuminates both works.

Third, we consider the challenge of evaluating research into the screen production process, where the research may not be evident in the final creative object. Here, as elsewhere, we draw on Ross Gibson's influential work 'The Known World' (2010) and its insights into the distinctive nature of creative practice research. Much like the UK's Robin Nelson (2013)[4], Gibson argues that artist-researchers use different modes of knowing as they engage with their creative practice, dealing with the implicit and the explicit, critical distance

[3] For more on these topics, the web page http://aspera.org.au/news/Sightlines conference/ presents a series of short interviews from the event.

[4] See his book, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*.

and immersion, and proposing that these modes can interact in a way that is not oppositional but generative of new knowledge of benefit to other practitioners and society more broadly. Where Nelson argues that such modes of research are a response 'to the increasing recognition that human subjectivity is inevitably involved in the production of knowledge' (Nelson, 2013: 52), Gibson stresses the role of words, particularly in communicating new knowledge to the scholarly community, in this process:

> when you have been in the studio, you have a story to tell. You have journeyed into experience and you have an account to offer about how the heuristic processes of acknowledgement proceeded through action and repercussion. This story of what happened in the making of the artwork is additional to the work that you can exhibit. (Gibson, 2010: 10-11)

Let us begin, however, by setting the context for these debates, drawing on a range of literature and examples that help to locate both the potential for and problems of screen production research in the academy.

On Research

It has been 30 years since Australian universities introduced creative practice Doctorates into the academy. Explorations of the field in terms of what is and is not accepted as research in creative practice disciplines have been conducted across many articles (see, for example, Barrett and Bolt, 2010; Allpress, Barnacle, Duxbury and Grierson, 2012; Webb, Brien and Burr, 2013) and PhDs (see, for, example, Boyd, 2010). These debates often proceed by way of definitions around 'knowledge' and 'research', these being the two fundaments upon which most definitions or parameters of scholarship in the academy are based.

In the context of the need for research to create new knowledge, or to apply existing knowledge in the sense that it provides new insights, it is useful to acknowledge some basic requirements here. For the Australian Research Council (ARC), research is defined as:

> The creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes.
>
> This definition of research is consistent with a broad notion of research and experimental development (R&D) as comprising of creative work undertaken on a

> systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. (Australian Research Council, 2012)

Furthermore, and of special interest to those working in creative practice, is the additional interpretation offered by Queensland University of Technology in its communication to staff in 2014. Seemingly in favour of applied research and connections with industry, this university advises its staff:

> This definition of research encompasses pure and strategic basic research, applied research and experimental development. Applied research is original investigation undertaken to acquire new knowledge but directed towards a specific, practical aim or objective (including a client-driven purpose). (Queensland University of Technology, 2014)

Knowledge thus sits at the centre of all types of research, including research that leads to innovations in practice. This points us to highlight that the notion of *knowing* should not just drive research, but in the case of a creative work, should also be at the core of how research is embodied, performed or otherwise communicated by its form, content and/or context (see Haseman, 2006). In short, if a work does not *know* what it is doing, where it comes from, how it is informed and to what extent it moves something forward –then it is not research.

There is logic to assessing a creative work against this criterion: if we can define what knowledge is and identify where and in what form it exists, then it should be relatively easy to understand and accept it as research or not. A problem, however, resides expressly in the terms we have used to articulate this apparent logic and simplicity: if a work does not *know*. How does a work 'know', and how can this knowing be communicated? Specific to our concerns here, what is the role of the creative practice researcher in this communication? In regard to the relationship between artwork and knowledge, we have a long tradition of Western philosophy and aesthetics upon which we can usefully draw.

On Knowing

Gadamer's (1986) work on the relevance of the 'beautiful' in a work of art, where the beautiful means knowledge, is instructive here. Gadamer's preference for the term 'beautiful' stems from Greek roots, where what was beautiful was truth. After Hegel and Kant, Gadamer argues for the beautiful as something that is not simply subjective. It is what Kant expresses

with his ‘I demand everyone’s agreement’, whilst not being able to convince by argument (1986: 18). After Hegel, knowledge in a work of art is a ‘sensuous showing of the Idea’ (1986: 33). Beaumegarten takes on this notion of ‘sensuous knowledge’ to speak of knowledge as experience (1986: 16)

The beautiful in art must be experienced. That experience brings us to a kind of knowing: a knowing through the senses; a knowing that happens via the body. But how do we speak about this experience? How do we articulate the knowledge that we have produced from contact with the artwork? Gadamer would claim that we cannot: the beautiful is that which belongs to the artwork alone, and that which cannot be known in any way other than in contact with the work itself. The significance of the work of art cannot be appropriated ‘for knowledge and understanding in all its meaning’, the work of art is not a ‘bearer of a message’ (1986: 33). In this context, if the art work is not a vessel for a particular idea because we cannot recuperate all of its meaning in intellectual terms, then how do we marry this notion with the academic research context?

There are a number of ideas that we cannot pursue in detail here, but we gesture to this tradition of thought so that we may demonstrate that knowledge in relation to a screen work is both a usefully and problematically flexible term: simple enough in a philosophical context, but problematic once we bring it into the research frameworks of the academy. What we want to highlight is that, while we might be able to accept, theoretically, that knowledge can exist in a screen work, it does not always sit there explicitly. This difficulty is derivative of our inability to reconcile the triad: art, knowledge, research. Gibson poses a prescient question:

> Given that the worldly value of scholarly research starts and finishes with how well and how widely any discovered batch of knowledge is communicated to a robust, discursive community of peers, how then can the artist-researcher’s implicit insights and emergent understandings best be brought out and put about in the form of explicit and useful knowledge? (Gibson, 2010: 6).

For *Sightlines* specifically and the discipline of Screen Production broadly, this question is at the core of our attempt to define a peer review process for screen practice research works. For this emerging research discipline, a key motivation for extending and improving the practice of peer review is to develop a community of researchers who share understandings of what it means to engage in screen production as research. With many of its academics in Australia

either currently undertaking or recently completing doctorates, and therefore on the brink of beginning to build research track records, the development of shared research literacies should be seen as a priority for the discipline. Biggs and Karlsson argue this is a common problem more broadly across the creative arts:

> We think it is essential for the art colleges to systematically try out and test methodologies and to develop quality assessment rooted in the needs and horizons of each art genre 'from within', and not to uncritically borrow methods from other research fields and disciplines. This is also, in our opinion, an important foundation for the urgent need of developing the internal meta-level discourse within the arts-based research disciplines. (2011: 410)

In this regard, we argue that shared research literacies should also underpin the design of an appropriate system for peer review – a system that might be used and/or appropriated by future researchers.

On Communicating

As we develop our system of peer review, a central question has thus emerged: where and in what form does the communication of research take place? Here we are concerned with both the intentions and the results of research, and how communicating them alongside the screen work might assist in its knowing. The goal is clear, but how might it occur? As Borgdorff highlights, 'what relation does the material-performative have to the rational-discursive and the engaged-critical in the research?' (2011: 47). Indeed, should the knowledge acquired from creative practice research be communicated in ways that others can understand? If research is performed through the content, form and/or context of a work, then does a written communication of that research make the work more 'knowing', or does it deny the 'known' qualities inherent in the work? For Gibson, knowing is always 'an after-effect of understanding' (Gibson, 2010: 4), occurring when the practitioner has experienced – *lived* – the research and is then in a position to reflect on it: 'it is *the shift in commonsense* and *the fresh ability to account for that shift* that ensures the occurrence is *research*' (Gibson, 2010: 5). For Nelson, communicating research is about 'presenting findings in a manner which demonstrates coherence by way of resonances across a range of discursive practices' (Nelson, 2013: 66).

We should acknowledge, however, that knowing is never definite, and not always complete. Knowing, for example in action research, can be iterative and cyclical, where different types of knowing occur at different times. Knowing can also be open to interpretation and discussion, which for some is precisely the point they want to make with a work. That being said, leaving knowing open to interpretation can be a problem for the peer review of creative works. In this instance, would it matter that what the work knows is open to interpretation?

Let us consider as an example, the examination of a PhD. If the assessor knows (feels) something about the creative work that is different to its intended knowing (research pursuit), and the intended knowing is not made explicit until after the assessment, then how is the work assessed: as a failure, or as an artistic triumph? One of this article's authors recalls his experience of assessing several creative practice PhDs, and some of the challenges that arose in relation to their communication of research. For example, in one PhD the purported research question was concerned with a theoretical stance on narrative structure, and how that might inform the writing of a screenplay. The challenge of examination came when the majority of the dissertation explored what was essentially the story content of the screenplay, not questions of narrative structure as signalled by the abstract. As a result, although the screenplay could be read in relation to what was stated in the abstract, because at least two thirds of the dissertation were about something else entirely, it made it difficult to see and comment on how the screenplay had been informed by and therefore embodied research. In effect there were at least three research questions and contributions at play in the one PhD, and so which one was the screenplay attempting to respond to?

In another PhD, the abstract and introduction stated that the research was concerned with a specific element of screenwriting craft, and how it might be shaped in response to a particular genre in a particular national context. However, much of the dissertation discussed more general national industry contexts and contained 'from the coal face' interviews with leading industry figures. Though this was all interesting and well researched, it ultimately skewed the reading of the screenplay because it was never clear what the creative work set out to know. Was its reading to be informed by an understanding of how the stated element of craft had been deployed, or was it instead to be read in response to what the interviews had revealed about the industry more generally? In this regard, while the abstract and introduction

signalled that the research would be visible on the page – the craft – the dissertation seemed to signal that the research was more evident through story content.

By contrast, another PhD did not have a 'completed' artefact as such, but rather a series of artefacts – screenplay drafts – that were read in relation to a cycle of critical discussions about process. Without a series of clear communications of research (i.e., written chapters giving the context of each screenplay draft), it would have been very difficult to know what the artefacts were setting out to achieve. By being told exactly what each draft was informed by critically and therefore embodied creatively, it was clear what each draft 'knew' about itself, and how each worked to tell the story of the overall research question.

These experiences and more suggest to us that in what is already a complex environment of peer review, having a clearly written communication of research can be both useful and valuable, especially for the researcher that needs their work to be evaluated against criteria set by them, in relation to their research intentions. We believe that further work needs to be undertaken in relation to how screen production researchers position themselves in relation to their work. Simply, how might they help to situate their work so that a reviewer knows what to look for and how to evaluate it? Although this may seem rudimentary, and for some, contradictory, by providing this kind of guidance, Screen Production might better establish itself as a research practice, especially in the context of an academic culture that is increasingly demanding and accountable. Using written language is not the only way to do this (a point we will return to later), but at this crucial time in the discipline, might it be our best chance?

We do, nevertheless, acknowledge the fact that practitioners might turn to the moving image because the form is the only manner in which certain research questions can be explored. The language of the moving image is different and not equivalent to written language; language cannot always do the work that the moving image does. This is a productive impossibility. For this reason, we believe that the relationship between the screen work and its written accompaniment bears interrogating, so that both the creative work itself and the manner by which it is positioned are enriched rather than diminished by the undertaking. In the first instance we encounter this relationship in the research degree, where candidates are required to produce a written dissertation alongside their creative work. One of this article's authors approached this task in terms set out by Benjamin's theory of translation (1968). This move was made in order to think of the writing as not being simply a 'report' –

which might be a reductive process – but rather as a separate work, one in which the writing and the moving image work each illuminated and expanded one another.

On Translation

There are important distinctions to be made between Benjamin's study of translation, where he is referring specifically to translation of one linguistic text to another linguistic text, and our own question regarding the screen work and its written communication of research. One of these distinctions is that in linguistic translation there is a first and a consequent text: the 'original' and the 'translation'. This pair, first and consequent, original and other, is unlike the relationship between screen work and written work: the making of both can be a simultaneous process. We ask that we suspend this difference for now to see what we might gain from the translation analogy.

For Benjamin, a translation that attempts to impart all of the information of the 'original' is sure to miss what is 'in addition to' the information (1968: 70). What is 'in addition to' is unique to the 'original' language; it is what is 'unfathomable', the 'mysterious', the 'poetic' (1968: 70). This 'mysteriousness' is the significance of the text. How then do we write about 'the significant' in the creative work in this other 'language' of the written work? Imparting the information is, in the end, meaningless or only part of the meaning; certainly, for Benjamin, it is not the 'poetic' dimension.

Benjamin claims that 'no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original.' (1968: 73) The second text needs to be its own text, as opposed to only imitating faithfully the original. This is not to say that there should be no correspondence between the two texts. Benjamin calls the translation the 'afterlife' of the original text (1968: 73). Again, 'afterlife' implies too much a linear consequence, but it is nonetheless fruitful to think about the written work as a continuance – it is not the same as, it is not a replica; it is another life, another text.

In Benjamin's construction, the idea of the first and consequent becomes decentralised too, because translation 'ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages', their 'kinship' (1968: 72). We might then consider that the contribution a creative practice research degree offers is precisely the 'reciprocal relationship' between the creative work and the dissertation: the very fact of having two parts in different forms and finding a relationship between them. The 'renewal'

happens to each language, or work, and is ongoing in its perpetual attempt at finding what Benjamin calls 'pure language' (1968: 74).[5]

'Pure language', a complete, full or perfect expression, is impossible in any language alone. However, in bringing an utterance into a relation with its translation, using another language, the two move together towards 'pure language'. We get a glimpse of what was previously hidden, not a full revelation, but in any case we might see something in excess of what either language could speak on its own. Languages supplement one another in a way that makes them more full, a little more complete, moving toward that which is mysterious in each. What we describe here, after Benjamin, is an *idealised state*, not a permanent or complete or entirely achievable position.

Benjamin says it is the task of the translator not only to illuminate what is dormant in the original but also to 'break through the decayed barriers of his own language' to illuminate a little more of what has remained hidden (1968: 79). This is surely the task of the practitioner/researcher also: to break through established boundaries within which we practice, and how we speak about the practice. The practitioner/researcher must allow their practice to be 'powerfully affected' by their exegetical writing, and must 'expand and deepen' their practice (1968: 81).

This model is one that attempts to reconcile the particular requirements of the academy, currently for the research degree candidate and also for the research statements written for ERA. We acknowledge that it presupposes a kind of predisposition toward language, as much as moving image, or whatever material the researcher's practice might include. Let us consider that writing, then, might be an important part of all academic training. The importance of being able to communicate practice through written and verbal language is not only a 'problem' for our discipline – it is a well-discussed feature of other disciplines such as design, where emphasis is being put on this in undergraduate degrees, in preparedness not only for an academic career but also for industry. The prominence is there because shared language is important. To do away with verbal or written language is to presuppose a degree of literacy from one's peers in whatever form one is working in. At this particular stage of development for our discipline, this might be risky. Can we say that we have a broad and common language established across screen production research?

[5] Of pure language Benjamin says: 'All supra historical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole – an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realised only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language.' (p. 74)

This is certainly not to privilege language over other modes of research, but rather, as a way of proceeding that might be seen as a crucial process: to critically move toward establishing a better shared understanding of the moving image and its role in research. This proposition is about using language not to satisfy enlightenment values of empiricism, definitiveness and rigid objective structures, but rather to create a passage, together with our practice, that moves toward a more shared understanding of the field.

On the Production Process

Research by filmmaker academics is often defined as research *through* creative practice (as distinct from research for or about practice) (see Haseman, 2006: 2-3). This focus on the *process* of making is significant in relation to the knowledge claims that can be made. While a separation of the final screen artefact from the process through which it is made is an artificial one (Davies, 2004), there are a number of arguments in favour of the production process being a focus for screen production research.

Articulating a disciplinary identity for screen production is a key motivation for the strategy around peer review advocated by this paper. Screen production is a growing but still small research discipline if compared with the related fields of cinema/screen studies, media studies and cultural studies. It is through the focus on knowledge through practice that filmmaker/academics can develop a research perspective that is distinct from their older and more developed neighbours. While the filmmaker/academic may be well-positioned to analyse the film they have produced, particularly if the issue of intentionality is relevant, the finished film is a research object that is available to all and the field of screen studies has significant existing expertise in this area. If the focus shifts to the production process, there is a growing field of film and television production studies (within cultural and media studies) that often takes a non-practitioner perspective on the making of the work, and can produce valuable knowledge on industry practices (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell, 2009). However, we would argue the practitioner brings insights into the complexities and nuances of the process that an external perspective can struggle to access. This could involve ways of working in the complex social, technical and logistical environment of filmmaking but also research into the conceptual and creative thinking that informs the making, the intersection between creative ideas and their practical execution. In screen production this would seem to be a rich territory for research as the implementation of ideas is influenced by a myriad array

of inter-related factors. However, if the research is primarily into the process that produces the film, how can this research be communicated and subsequently peer-reviewed?

While there would be multiple answers to this question, watching the finished film on its own would not seem an adequate way to identify and communicate the research. Written text would be the most conventionally accepted approach but there is an increasing range of online and electronic methods to combine written text with still and video images. For this discipline such an approach would seem to be the most suitable way to integrate analysis of the process with audio-visual material that documents what is being discussed. In many ways a 'publication' taking advantage of these converged forms of communication allows the affordances of both written text and moving images to support and enhance each other. It may be that logistical issues like practitioner expertise and appropriate resourcing by the publisher are holding back the wider use of this approach.[6]

The production of video essays that examine screen works (usually from a cinema studies perspective) is a growing publishing phenomenon that is also relevant to this debate. While many of these works are expositional in style, they frequently reflect a rigorous analysis of cinematic form, tone or other stylistic elements and suggest that screen studies scholars are increasingly seeing the advantages of communicating research in the form in which it has been made.[7] This mode of research communication would seem to be highly appropriate for practitioners and it is perhaps surprising that it has not been more frequently used.

On Peer Review

There are currently few outlets for the 'publication' of audiovisual and screen-based research works, and within the models that do exist, there is a range of approaches to the conceptual and logistical challenges involved. A number of outlets have a focus on video as a fine art practice, while others make use of audiovisual means to disseminate more traditional

[6] Some publishers of audio-visual research set limits on the length of works that can be screened that can limit the depth and complexity of the work exhibited. Sightlines conference consciously decided not to set any limits of length

[7] As examples, see koganoda.com; Understanding Art House | The Wolf of Wall Street: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3fzFUs-hYM; The Role of Landscape, Nature and Environment in War Films: https://vimeo.com/34857818)

research.[8] We looked to these extant models when designing the approach for the Sightlines conference journal. Most significantly we looked to the model used by Screenworks, an audiovisual publication linked to the Journal of Media Practice, and the Journal of Artistic Research, and we drew on the experience from ASPERA's past attempts at the task.

Historically, ASPERA conducted two processes for the peer review of screen works, in 2008 and 2009. In the first, eight productions were submitted and reviewed; in the second, ten productions were submitted, from seven filmmakers. Three ASPERA peers – defined as academics working in the field of screen production – reviewed works against the following criteria:

- Scholarly contribution to knowledge.
- Originality.
- Significance to the field.

These criteria were chosen to reflect those used in text-based academic journals and there was an acknowledgement that how to define something like 'scholarly contribution to knowledge' in the context in the context of filmmaking practice was by no means settled. However, it was felt that this should be left to the individual reviewer to judge, rather than provide guidance that may be overly narrow or limiting. A 250-word research statement was required to accompany each work, which mirrors the requirement for ERA creative works – though this is now defined more specifically as 2000 characters, using three headings of *research background*, *research contribution* and *research significance*. Peer reviewers gave both quantitative and qualitative feedback to those who submitted work, which included a numerical rating and written comments. This process did not lead to publication, and it was acknowledged that the traditional role of peer review as a stage when the work can be improved prior to publication could not work the same way with most screen works, which are technically and logistically complex productions not easily revised once complete. However, the consensus from the ASPERA community was that practitioners could use this peer review as proof of research evaluation. The original call for submissions stated:

> Screen practitioners who participate in the ASPERA process can use this indicator of peer recognition as an acknowledgment of the quality of their screen production

[8] These examples are: Screenworks, Journal for Artistic Research, Journal of Creative Work, Audiovisual Thinking, Media Object, IM Journal, NMEDIAC, New Scholar and Altitude.

> research when dealing with their universities or the wider research community […] The qualitative feedback can also be seen as valuable in developing a research culture within the academic screen production community and a shared understanding of the key issues in what is an emerging field of research.

This approach was modelled on Screenworks, which began with a pilot project in 2005 and to date has had five volumes (see, http://jmpscreenworks.com/?s=screenworks). During the mid 2000s, the Journal of Media Practice placed significant focus on the articulation of media practice as research in the UK, with various symposia devoted to the issue and the development of a variety of approaches to peer review (see, for example, Volume 8(1), 2007). Their approach to the written accompaniment to the moving image work was thus:

> Work is published alongside a research statement, which offers a 'route map' of the research process, together with two anonymous reviews, which provide critical feedback on both the work itself and its research context. (Screenworks, n/d)

The Journal for Artistic Research is an international online publication designed 'for the identification, publication and dissemination of artistic research and its methodologies, from all arts disciplines.' It explicitly seeks to offer alternatives to written text in the exposition of the research, with its 'multimodal' Research Catalogue giving the artist/researcher a range of audio, visual and design options with which they can present their work. Submissions to JAR must meet one key requirement: 'they must expose artistic practice as research' (Journal for Artistic Research, n/d).

Unlike traditional and established academic journals, both Screenworks and JAR are designed to not only publish original research, but to explore and develop the meaning of research in emerging, non-traditional, creative practice disciplines. They take a non-prescriptive approach to evaluation criteria and an explicitly dialogic and more public approach to the peer review process. The focus is not just on the individual researcher, but on the broader research community and the development within this community of a shared understanding about what research in creative practice involves. In the work environment of the contemporary academy, where there is substantial pressure to meet defined performance outcomes against externally set benchmarks, this exploratory and non-prescriptive approach to research evaluation does not always gain support from either time-poor individual researchers or their managers. However, it was an approach that struck us as the most suitable for the long-term development of our research discipline at the current time.

It is for these reasons that we have chosen these two publications as our best-practice models for the peer review process we are proposing. In developing these models for our purposes, we want to avoid the requirement of a defined word-length research statement (such as that used by Screenworks), which runs the risk of this text being given too much emphasis and playing a disproportionate role in the evaluation of the research. We prefer an optional approach to the length, or even the use of a written statement at all, leaving it up to the researcher to set the criteria by which their work should be evaluated.

While seeking to emulate the JAR model, we nevertheless want to customise its approach to better suit the specific focus of our discipline and the requirements of screen production researchers, whose creative practice is frequently undertaken in a professional/industrial context rather than a fine art one. Furthermore, while JAR is certainly encouraging open debate around its own guidelines,[9] the actual dialogue is less than publicly present. This is something we want to emphasise with our model, which we propose will include not only reports from reviewers, but also a response to the reports from the practitioner, should they wish to do so. In the interest of a safe and open public debate, and in response to some participants' concerns, we have ensured that reviewers can remain anonymous, should they wish to do so.

Anonymity, of course, plays into the traditional peer-review process and is one of its attendant pillars, but becomes a difficult aspect to maintain in the screen production environment due to the nature of screen works (where it is more difficult to remain as anonymous author). In our specific case, the films that are being peer-reviewed have already screened at the Sightlines conference, hence, it is not practicable for the authors to remain anonymous. We do not see this as hugely problematic at this stage of development, as our focus is on generating debate and discussion so that we might work towards a best practice model in the future.

There are other choices we have made for this pilot project, which hinge upon a number of remaining issues specific to screen production that differ from – and in some cases conflict with – the traditional model of peer review used in text-based publishing. One of these is the issue of non-exclusive exhibition. As well as needing to have their research published in relevant academic outlets, practitioner-academics are also under pressure to have

[9] This includes guidelines to reviewers that are underscored by language that leaves their own guidelines up for debate. For example: 'please take into account whether or not the submission contains a description of the question, issue or problem that is explored, *and if not, if such an omission matters'* (JAR, n/d. Our emphasis).

their work screened to the public, either through film festival or broadcast arrangements that require exclusive access. This can mean that some of the most interesting and accomplished screen works will (sometimes reluctantly) be withdrawn from an academic 'publication' process, for fear it will jeopardise chances of the work being taken up in a more public and high-profile exhibition option.

This situation skews the nature of the screen works submitted for peer review in a way that is not representative of the discipline, and risks its development by excluding some of its most impressive productions. For this reason, there is a desire by some within the discipline to allow peer review to occur, even if the work is not available for publication/exhibition in its full form, viewing the process instead as a form of research evaluation and validation. The debate around this issue is ongoing, with a solution seemingly intractable as long as screen works in this context have a dual function as research objects and creative works for public consumption. Despite this, our strong conviction for the development of an audio-visual 'journal' for research films comes from the belief that there is a need for alternative spaces that accommodate different sorts of moving image work that should be recognised by the academy.

Conclusion

Peer review as a process used to evaluate research presumes a community of peers with a shared understanding of what constitutes research quality in that field. In developing an approach to peer review that is suitable for research in screen production, we have sought to address issues that are shared with other creative practice disciplines, such as long-standing tensions between the concepts of knowledge and art, and between implicit and explicit modes of knowing. We have also sought to deal with issues more specific to the needs and challenges of screen production, such as the anonymity of the author, as well as locating and articulating research within the complex and diverse audio-visual, narrative, technological, cultural and affective dimensions of the practice. We highlighted the distinction between the research and the communication of the research in the peer review process and the importance of not blurring these when the research object (most commonly a film) is also a means of communication. If written text is to be used in this communication process, a means for conceiving of the relationship between written language and creative work derived from Walter Benjamin's theory of translation was proposed, where the two forms of

communication complement and illuminate each other in a more equal way than is often the case.

Screen production as a research discipline is growing, certainly in Australia, but with this growth comes a need to develop the breadth and depth of understanding about how this creative practice can be viewed as a research activity. We see the development of a robust and discipline-appropriate form of peer review as an effective way to achieve this. The process for the peer review of films as part of our proposed Sightlines conference publication has drawn on our research into past and existing approaches, both in screen production and related fields, and we hope it will offer a model of best practice for the Australian context.

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