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The biopic screenplay as a research output: Towards a working definition of narrative fiction filmmaking methodology

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Abstract

Can the writing of a screenplay or the making of a narrative fiction film be considered a form of academic research? This will be a familiar question for those professional filmmakers entering the academy. To answer this question, scholars of screenwriting and screen production face the difficulty of articulating their creative practice *as* research within the broader institutional research cultures of the academy. This paper seeks to overcome this difficulty by reflecting on the methods employed in the process of screenwriting a biopic about British boxer Randolph Turpin. To demonstrate how screenwriting and screen production practice generates and disseminates new knowledge, I offer a working definition of *narrative fiction filmmaking as methodology*, where mise-en-scène is shown to operate as a core reflective strategy.

Keywords

biopic

screenwriting

screen production

fiction

methodology

mise-en-scène

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Prelude

Can the writing of a screenplay or the making of a narrative fiction film be considered a form of academic research? This will be a familiar question for those professional filmmakers entering the academy. To answer this question, filmmaking scholars face the difficulty of articulating their creative practice *as* research in an institutional setting in which (traditional) empirical methodologies hold sway over what constitutes the generation of new knowledge (Batty et al 2018; Oliver 2018). The tension between creative practice research, and the broader institutional research cultures of the academy, are dramatically summed up in Craig Batty's short script *A vacuous screenplay in search of rigour,* published as a research artefact, in which a Professor of Screenwriting experiences a crisis of confidence in the relative value and impact of his work while chatting to a high-flying researcher working in the field of Medicine (Batty 2018).

Dr KO

Screenwriters do PhDs?

Wise flicks through the pages dramatically - yes they do!

Dr KO

And like, what are the topics? Is it serious academic stuff?

Wise surreptitiously hides the title of the PhD - 'Bronzed Zombies'.

Through telling an *affecting* story that champions the primary of practice research methodologies, Batty's script communicates the need for scholars working in the fields of screenwriting and screen production to overcome the difficulties of articulating their creative practice *as* research. More about affect later.

The need for filmmakers to overcome the difficulties of articulating their creative practice as research is a pressing one. In the last 20 years there has been a proliferation of screen production courses in the tertiary sector (Dooley 2019: 431), with an attendant flow of professional filmmakers entering the academy as educators and scholars. The locus of many of these new courses *inside* established university film and media studies departments (Film Making Research Network 2019) has created a tension over what qualifies as the production and dissemination of new knowledge within the academy. As Richard Raskin argues, there is a pervasive assumption, or at least suspicion, among scholars working in more established academic fields, including film studies, that the process of *making* films lacks academic rigour. This assumption reveals a profound misconception of filmmaking as simply the application of technical skills (Raskin 2018).

This misconception results in attempts to shoehorn screenwriting and screen production outputs into theoretical frameworks from other fields, most often film studies, 'with its own vocabulary, agenda, goals, and boundaries' (Rosenstone 1995: 9), in a bid to achieve some form of balance between 'theory' and 'practice' (Raskin 2018). It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that screen production courses founded on the tenacious binary view of 'theory' versus 'practice' (Berkley 2009; Morris 2019) often resort to bolting a film studies dissertation or exegetic thesis onto a practice output, or even subordinating the practice output to an aside (Berry 2018: 104; Jones 2018: 243).

This is precisely the problem I encountered when I began working at the Northern Film School at Leeds Beckett University in 2012. My Honours screenwriting students were required to submit a full-length written dissertation in addition to a feature-length screenplay, while the regulations governing my own PhD candidature at the University of Melbourne, stipulated that I submit a 40,000-word written exegesis in addition to my screen practice output. Convinced that my professional practice as a screenwriter and film director was already *doing* research, the challenge was articulating this to a skeptical academy. So I set about formulating a (written) working definition of *narrative fiction filmmaking as methodology*, where screenwriting and mise-en-scène operate as core strategies. I present this definition here, with reference to my professional practice in the form of a feature-length screenplay for a biopic about British boxer Randolph Turpin, entitled *My Brother, My Killer*.

ACT 1

My story

> 'You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'
>
> Nelle Harper Lee (1960), *To Kill a Mockingbird*



Alison © Michael Bentham

The journey towards articulating my creative practice as a filmmaker began in a state of grieving. Fifteen years ago, Alison, my partner since the age of 19, was dying of an incurable disease.

As a filmmaker, one way of trying to cope with this crisis was to immerse myself in the researching and writing of biographical screenplays, the subjects of which had all experienced psychological trauma. I was aware that by trying to climb into the skin of these historical characters was, in part, a cathartic process, and that gaining insights into the (emotional) interiority of these men might help me to navigate my way through my own crisis. The question of fidelity to the original living people was, therefore, of particular importance. That is, I felt intuitively that I needed to gain truthful insights into the lived experience of the historical referent if I was to learn anything meaningful about my own experience of psychological trauma.

In this context, I was acutely aware of the (ethical) tensions that may arise between 'facts' and the fictional frame of the biopic, between historical fidelity to the original life lived and the pressure of commercial storytelling imperatives. But it was during this period of project development, that my concerns for fidelity were challenged from an unexpected source. It was not the film producers pushing for a marketable story that created tension around notions of truth and fidelity in relation to my biographical subjects, but a bereavement counsellor, who pointed out that all my tales of historical others were, possibly, all about *me*.

A literature review

Standing at the side of boxer Randolph Turpin's grave, my greatest research challenge, therefore, was coming to know a man I could never meet – Randolph Turpin died in 1966 – mindful of the possibility that I might be situating the story in an autobiographical space in order to process my own personal trauma (Tóibín in Lane 2018: 161). As this had profound implications for the truth claims of the fiction narrative I was generating, it was important to gain a better understanding of the intersection of screenwriter and biographical referent. First, I turned to the available scholarly literature on the biopic.

As a filmmaker I found that these texts (Bingham 2010; Brown 2013; Custen 1992) gave little insight into the process I engage in as screenwriter in the creation of a screenplay, or as a filmmaker making a film. To cite historian Robert Rosenstone, while Custen's enquiry into the biopic deals 'extensively with the mores and practices of Hollywood', it fails to satisfy 'anyone interested in the problems of shaping biography, of just how one can render a life - either in words on the page, or in images on the screen (or in any other way)' (Rosenstone 2012: 102). Indeed, much of the existing literature labours over a taxonomic assessment of the form.

Custen's enquiry focuses entirely on the Hollywood biopic of the studio era, with an analysis that links studio production of films about 'great (white) men' to American (patriarchal) founding myths (Custen 1992), while Bingham's work broadens the scope into a genre study that includes post-studio era and non-US biopics in an attempt to present an evolutionary classification of the genre (Bingham 2010). *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (Brown et al. 2014) broadens the taxonomic scope of enquiry further to include World Cinema, and promises a re-evaluation of the biopic that 'highlights the relationship between films and their cultural and institutional contexts and production' (Brown et al. 2014: 19-20).

The positioning of these enquiries raises the crucial question of whether a practice-led exploration of the biopic can be framed within the wider field of film studies. A review of the existing literature suggests not. Scholars working in the field of film studies are simply asking different questions from those who are engaged in film practice. To cite Rosenstone again, while it is appropriate for Robert Burgoyne to describe a film like *Saving Private Ryan* as a re-illusioning of America post-Vietnam, within the field of film studies, such an enquiry gives no insight into the kinds of questions the filmmakers were asking, such as what did it *feel* like to be an American soldier under fire during the Normandy Landings of 1944 (Rosenstone, 2006/2012: xv).

This points to a significant methodological divide between film studies and film*making*, and so I moved away from the field of film studies to begin the reflective process of articulating the methods I used as a screenwriter in creating a cinematic expression of the lived experience of boxer Randolph Turpin.

In pursuit of knowledge

For a man who gained such fame in the 1940s and 50s, Randolph Turpin left remarkably few personal traces of his existence: some letters, guarded interviews in newsreel clips (he was clearly camera shy), and a suicide note. So how could I fill the gap between events as depicted on the public record, and the interiority of Randolph Turpin, the man?

A starting point for a methodological approach to answering this question stems from my time as a postgraduate filmmaking student at the UK's National Film and Television School (NFTS).

My mentor at NFTS was the late Scottish visionary, Colin Young (Gilbey 2021). Young had a background in philosophy and visual anthropology. He was chairman of the film school at UCLA in the 1960s, at a time of great innovation and flux, when Jean Luc-Godard and Jean Rouch were initiating the French New Wave, and documentary students were being exposed to (and encouraged to learn from) Italian neo-realism. Young encouraged a convergence of ideas from different critical traditions, including ethnography, philosophy, and different forms of filmmaking. Indeed, it was the bedrock of his pedagogical approach. David MacDougall remembers being encouraged to read Merleau-Ponty at UCLA (MacDougall 2001), and in his book *Transcultural Cinema,* cites a key idea from Merleau-Ponty's 1968 work *The Visible and The Invisible*: 'Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 139).

Building on Jean Rouch's model of ethno-fiction, where 'as an ethnographer and filmmaker, there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction' (Rouch et al

1989: 299), Young's students then looked to techniques of narrative fiction in a bid to produce a construction of the social experience of others (MacDougall 1998: 87). This linking of a phenomenological positioning and fiction techniques to reveal the interiority of character, produced a new way for filmmakers to engage with the cinema subject. In MacDougall's words, '...the subject is part of the filmmaker, the filmmaker part of the subject' (MacDougall 1998: 29). This inter-disciplinary learning environment produced the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, Lawrence Kasdan, John Milius and Paul Schrader in the US and, later, as head of the National Film and Television School, Lynne Ramsay, Beeban Kidron, Nick Broomfield and Sean McAllister in the UK.

By 1991, the last cohort of Colin Young's students entered a learning environment, rooted in the ethnographic methodology of Jean Rouch, a learning environment that was encouraging screenwriters of fiction to write from their own experience, and connect this subjective (auto-biographical) story, and point of view, to a wider cultural and social context (Petrie 2011; Young 2012). In other words, writing narrative fiction was seen as a form of life writing, and the characters that screenwriters created were projections of themselves, or subjective projections of people they knew.

The last 15 years has seen a branch of ethnography take another turn from an interpretive biographical methodological approach to an interpretive auto-ethnographic position, and adopting much of the narrative lexicon familiar to the screenwriter. Auto-ethnographers structure their ethnographic enquiries around auto-biographical (usually traumatic) emotional narrative turning points, termed by auto-ethnographers as epiphanies (Denzin 2014: 28; Ellis 2004: 33). In this context, my 'epiphany' was the emotional trauma of losing my wife to MS,

and this drew me, empathically, towards researching, as a storyteller, biographical subjects such as Randolph Turpin, who had experienced psychological trauma.

Auto-ethnographers have developed an ethical code called 'writing to right' (Denzin 2015). The code applies narrative fiction to right the wrongs of the past. When applied to screenwriting practice, 'writing to right' does not attempt to adhere to notions of historical fidelity. It also goes beyond the interpretive practice of discovering, like the historian, "how and why and what these things meant and mean" (Jenkins 1995: 33). 'Writing to right' also pushes beyond Jimmy McGovern's notion of setting the record straight in the drama doc (McGovern 2016: 90), which is about challenging official events of the past. Situated within a "dynamic space of invention"[1] (Maras 2016: 14-15), 'writing to right' involves an inter-subjective fusion between fact and fiction, a re-writing of the past that brings justice to the historical subject and holds others to account. 'Writing to right' happens through the process of narrative construction, of inventing a new version of the past, a new history. Crucially, it is the power of narrative fiction to re-vision and re-invent the past that gives the screenwriter the tools to construct a work that 'questions the official truths about the past so provocatively that we are forced once again to look to history and consider how events mean to us today' (Rosenstone 1995: 129).

Writing to Right

I turn a page of the Warwickshire Coroner's report into the death of Randolph Turpin, and reveal a letter. Randolph's distinctive writing. "Today I feel so depressed and low in spirits, that I must write down, what is worrying me, and why". A j'accuse letter written by Randolph two years before his

> death. Randolph, fearing death at the hands of his tormentors. "Signed this 4th day of March 1964, on Oath of God Almighty, Randolph Adolphus Turpin." This was the letter that Randolph's wife Gwen asked the coroner to read out in court in 1966. The coroner refused. What if I were to re-write history? Righting wrongs. I imagine the character of Gwen, reading out the letter at Randolph's funeral service. Holding Randolph's tormentors to account. Writing to right.

Auto-ethnography, therefore, has a significant resonance with my practice as a filmmaker, and Colin Young's vision of filmmakers as ethnographically engaged cultural producers (MacDougall 2001; Petrie 2011: 129), and so provided an appropriate methodological approach from which I could begin articulating filmmaking as a creative practice.

As my enquiry progressed however, the need to find a clearer, discipline-specific, articulation of my creative practice as a filmmaker became apparent. Just as Hilary Mantel needed to articulate a working definition of her process as a writer of historical fiction in order to defend the (historical) validity of her enquiries into the Tudors (Mantel 2017: Lecture 5), I needed to reach a clearer articulation of my creative practice as a maker of narrative fiction films, not only to reach a better understanding of the nature of my intersection with my biographical referent, but to reach a better understanding of how filmmaking practice, of which screenwriting is a part, can generate and disseminate new knowledge per se.

EXT. CEMETERY – DAY

A WRITER (ME) stands looking at the gravestone of boxer RANDOLPH TURPIN.

ME

Hi, Randolph. I've come to ask
for your permission to turn your
story into a fiction film.

[no answer]

ME

I want to tell the story of you,
the champion boxer, of course.
But I also want to reconstruct the
final days. I know it's speculation, but
I think I know why you took your own
life. I feel I can tell your story *through*
my own story of grieving.

[no answer]

ME

Ethnographer Barbara Myerhoff's
method was to imagine talking
with the dead person. She called
this a 'third voice'.

RANDOLPH

Sounds bloody daft to me.

ME

Randolph? Is that really you?

RANDOLPH

You tell me.

ME

I don't know. But maybe
this third voice can reveal
a truth. And perhaps set the
record straight. But I'm not
sure the historians will buy it.

RANDOLPH

What's this talk of setting
the record straight?

ME

There's this man, Denzin. He uses
an auto-ethnographic methodology
to tell stories that right
the wrongs of the past.

RANDOLPH

You talk a lot of jargon mate.
So how are *you* gonna right
this wrong?

ME

Using fiction, I can bring your

enemies to account.

RANDOLPH

Gerrout, I like the sound of that.

ME

I've got your blessing then?

RANDOLPH

Sure mate. But remember, I didn't really say these words. Ta rah.

ACT 2

Screenwriting as Research

> 'If I would tell you, it would change you. You won't be anymore the same. If I tell you and you are still the same, why should I bother to talk?'
>
> Heschel, in conversation with Barbara Myerhoff, 2007, p. 25

Within the growing fields of screenwriting and screen production research, a lively discussion has taken shape regarding what qualifies as the production and dissemination of new knowledge within the academy (Baker et al., 2015; Batty & Kerrigan, 2018; Batty et al., 2018; Mees & Murray, 2019; Raskin 2018).

The notion of *affect*, so hauntingly communicated in the above exchange between Holocaust survivor 'Heschel', and ethnographer, witness, storyteller and filmmaker Barbara Myerhoff, forms the cornerstone of a special issue of *TEXT*, entitled 'Screenplays as Research Artefacts' (2018), in which editors Craig Batty and Dallas John Baker collate a series of screenplays, published as none traditional research outputs. It is a bold gesture, asserting the primacy of practice in the form of a series of screenwriting-*as*-research artefacts. The collection presents a central argument - that the use of fiction as method generates knowledge that is affective rather than simply textual (Batty et al 2018: 1-8). When reading the screenplays 'we laugh, we cringe, we cry, we feel good, we feel bad, we sympathise, we identify, we rage' (Baker 2017: 342, cited by Batty et al 2018: 6), and this affect opens 'an alternative route to knowing, a different way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in creative research works such as screenplays, which we experience in an embodied way' (Batty et al 2018: 6).

Rosenstone makes a similar case for the validity of (affective) knowledge generated through the application of fiction as method in the construction of historical fiction films and biopics, observing that *personalising* and *emotionalising* the past through the point of view of a central protagonist *can* have historical integrity (Rosenstone 1995: 11). This is an important paradigmatic shift for a historian, and one that aligns with the knowledge claims of writers of historical fiction such as Hilary Mantel, who argues that she is in pursuit of a kind of knowledge that sits outside the academic field of the historian (Mantel 2017: Lecture 5).

In her series of BBC Reith Lectures, Mantel fully articulates a methodological approach to writing biographical and historical fiction narratives in which a range of methods, central of which is empathy, are employed in a performative inter-subjective process of the imagination to construct her historical characters. In doing so, she draws a clear line between her

methodological approach as a writer of fiction narratives, and the empirical positioning of the historian (Mantel 2017: Lecture 5). Indeed, Mantel's central (methodological) argument is not only positioned outside the academic field of the historian (Mantel 2017: Lecture 5), but sits outside empirical research activities into our understanding of the emotional interiority of others, period. Therefore, to gain meaningful insights into the intersection of the narrative fiction (screen)writer and the interiority of a biographical subject, the scope of the enquiry needs to move away from the theoretical frameworks of the historian, journalist and film studies scholar, and centre around the locus of praxis in which (screen)writers of narrative fiction operate.

This a space where narrative fiction would be recognised as the primary methodology of engaging with the subject, where imagination and empathy are core methods used to conduct an enquiry, and where the construction of fictional representations as metaphor becomes the 'principal vehicle of understanding' of the interiority of the other (Lackoff & Johnson 1980: 160; McKee 1998: 375; Mantel 2017: Lecture 2, Lecture 5).

Empathy as Method

> Depression. I know what it is to be in that windowless box. No way out. Trying to find a space where there is no space. No hope. Still trying to find a way out through narrative. Trying to write my way out of the box. Imagining a way. Creating a way. Unimaginable. I have Randolph Turpin's bank book. Hidden in the vaults of the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper for 40 years. Double-entry book-keeping. Randolph's pencil marks? Circles around the looping ink figures. Handwriting from another age. And there it is. The missing purse. A huge amount of money, never paid. The

> catalyst that all the journalists, the biographers, the doco makers missed. The unmistakable sign of sibling ***betrayal***. Managerial ***betrayal***. Promoter ***betrayal***. ***Betrayal*** as emotion. Psychological trauma. Clear as day. How could the hacks have missed that? Now I *know* that Randolph declared war against a force he could not defeat. Against his brother, surrogate father, his manager George Middleton, surrogate father, his promoter Jack Solomons, surrogate father. This is a fight he couldn't possibly win. Or could he? Randolph Turpin in that windowless box. Trying to find a space. A way out. Imagining a terrible way. Out. Transcendence.

This is a description of the moment I applied an empathic engagement with my subject, Randolph Turpin, to an analysis of numbers in a material artefact (a bank book), which resulted in my (re)constructing a key turning point in his life within a fictional frame. This is Maras's dynamic space of invention in action (Maras 2016: 14-15).

In the following scene from the feature screenplay, *My Brother, My Killer*, I imagine a clinically depressed and increasingly paranoid Randolph Turpin, reeling from the discovery of the missing purse - a verifiable fact. And I imagine the sense of betrayal he must have felt at discovering the theft. Indeed, one of Randolph's professional boxing managers was his own brother, middleweight British champion Lionel "Dick" Turpin. I imagine how Randolph, facing bankruptcy and ruin - another fact recorded on the historical record - might have turned against his siblings. I imagine what might have been said. That is, I construct a fictional representation of that which was never recorded in the case of Randolph Turpin - the dialogues. And in doing so, I write a scene which is a constructed (fictional) interaction and conversation between Randolph and middle brother, Jackie, built upon the empathic

knowledge gained from engaging with the historical subject, and interpreting the historical record, through my own experience of psychological trauma. In doing so I generate affect, a 'sensory knowing' (Berkeley 2018) of what it feels like to experience psychological trauma through the fictional representation of Randolph Turpin.

107. INT. KITCHEN — DAY

Randolph walks back and forth in a daze. There's a loud knocking at the back door.

RANDOLPH

Who is it?

There is no answer. Randolph walks over and wrenches the door open to reveal Jackie.

JACKIE

Alright bab.

RANDOLPH

What does it bloody look like?

JACKIE

Sorry I asked.

RANDOLPH

What do you want?

Jackie shrugs.

JACKIE

Since you ask, I'll have

a cup of tea.

Randolph walks over to the café's main kettle and switches it on. He slumps down on a chair.

JACKIE

If you need anything…

RANDOLPH

I want those bastards as took

my money to pay me back.

As the kettle heats up Randolph becomes more agitated.

RANDOLPH

Honest to God Jackie I feel

like killing someone.

Jackie keeps his distance.

The kettle begins steaming. Randolph pours water into a pot, swills it around, slops some tea into a mug and puts it on the counter.

Jackie takes the mug.

JACKIE

Ta.

He goes to take a sip but Randolph gives him a filthy look.

JACKIE

What?

Randolph jabs his finger to a sign above the counter which reads: DO NOT ASK FOR CREDIT AS REFUSAL OFTEN OFFENDS.

JACKIE

Very funny.

RANDOLPH

I'm not joking.

Jackie takes a long hard look at his brother. Randolph stands his ground.

Jackie puts the mug down without taking a sip of tea, shakes his head and leaves the cafe without a word.

Screen Production Practice as Research

More recently, as co-editor with Susan Kerrigan of the book *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* (2018), Batty has curated a series of texts that

broaden the discourse around defining screen production practice methodologies in the academy. The collection contains some robust arguments that recognise and articulate the deep reflexivity already embedded in areas of screen production practice, such as filmmaking. These arguments both support movement towards asserting the primacy of screen production practice in the academy, and outline methodological approaches that would help achieve this aim (Bell 2018: 47-66; Berry 2018: 103-120).

Desmond Bell flags up the absurdity of research funding bodies requiring replicable outcomes from fields that are concerned with creative originality (Bell 2018: 52). Echoing the words of Hilary Mantel - that the writer of historical fiction is in pursuit of a kind of knowledge that sits outside the academic field of the historian (Mantel 2017: Lecture 5) - Bell argues that the creative arts' emphasis on 'making and doing' has its own 'distinctive mode of apprehending and understanding the world' (Bell 2018: 54). Bell cites Christopher Frayling's 1993 delineation of art research in the academy, to demonstrate how the first of three categories - Research *into* Art and Design - is currently the dominant paradigm, most likely because it is a category that involves employing critical or empirical methods to evaluate media and design works (Bell 2018: 58). This is the domain of film and media studies. However, it is Frayling's third category - Research *for* Art and Design - that is closest to what artists actually do. That is, artists engage in a (research) enquiry, of which the artwork (film) output is the artefact.

> While the academy may get itself tied up in knots about the methodological auspices of university-based arts research, no one actually doubts that artists engage in substantial research activity in the preparation and making of their work (Bell 2018: 59).

I have described in some detail the research processes and methods I engaged in writing a biopic about Randolph Turpin. It is the nature of this research activity that meets the first objection from the academy. Such research, because it is often hard to evaluate under empirical conditions, is often dismissed as 'background' research (Bell 2018: 59). Bell has no

doubts as to the source of this objection.

> Needless to say, many of these academics have little or no experience of the creative arts. That said, it seems strange that this set of grounded research activities receives so little attention from academics who have expended so much effort trying to delineate the character of practice-based arts research. Maybe this research activity is all but obscured by surviving Dionysian notions of the artist as an individual genius. Or maybe from the academy's perspective, it's simply not 'the right kind of research' (2018: 60).

Ethnography and Screen Production Methodology

Marsha Berry steers the discussion towards considering whether a turn in ethnography towards the 'non-representational', offers a way forward for thinking about Screen Production methodologies (Berry 2018: 110-118).

Like Colin Young, Berry identifies an (historical) affinity between the fields of filmmaking and ethnography (Berry 2018: 117; MacDougall 2001). Together with ethnography's narrative turn, it is perhaps not surprising that descriptions of non-representational theory (Vannini 2015: 2-16) can often read like descriptions of narrative filmmaking practice. Another response to the crisis of representation in the social sciences (see Clifford et al 1986), non-representational theory is a methodological approach that recognizes what Lorimer describes as 'our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds' (Lorimer, 2005: 83). Like narrative fiction filmmaking, non-representational theory is relational (Vannini 2015: 5), in the way mise-en-scène as a filmmaking strategy is relational in engaging the filmmaker in an inter-subjective dramatic process with performer, space and material objects, to evoke interiority, and create meaning through metaphor (Elsaesser 1972; Gibbs 2002: 1-26). Non-representational theory also proposes that research findings be situated in the present, with a movement forwards towards emergent knowledge (Ingold 2011: 41). Similarly, films are conceived and presented as present-tense narratives, and experienced by the audience as a movement forward in space-time. Further, the dynamic, generative,

'moving forward' emphasis of non-representational research draws a clear distinction between traditional (empirical) research methods and what Vannini refers to as research 'strategies'.

> Non-representational research renders the liveliness of everyday interaction through methodological strategies that animate, rather than deaden, the qualities of the relation among people, objects, organic matter, animals, and their natural and built environments. In other words, non-representational ethnographies aim to be as full of vitality as the lifeworlds they endeavor to enact (Vannini 2005: 320).

As a filmmaker, making a biopic about the historical figure of Randolph Turpin, I have used empirical data-collection methods that would be familiar to a historian, while employing 'strategies' - such as scripting and mise-en-scène - to *animate* this data into 'cinematic utterances' (Gibbs 2002: 1-26).

Stemming as it does from creative practice (Vannini 2015), key aspects of non-representational theory can thus be seen as the fruit of a decades-old cross-pollination of ideas between filmmaking and the social sciences. It is therefore appropriate that Berry draws attention to this link at a time when the fledgling field of screen production practice is finding its place in the academy. But I resist Berry's suggestion that non-representational approaches in ethnography simply be 'pressed into service' for screen production research (Berry 2018: 107). Implicit in this suggestion, once again, is the assumption that filmmaking practice lacks the required rigour to be considered a suitable methodology for conducting academic research. Instead, I would like to consider Berry's proposal as a re-opening of a rich discourse between two equally rigorous fields, one that invites a response from the discipline of filmmaking.

My response, as a filmmaker, is to suggest an alternative, working definition of filmmaking methodology that draws on, develops, and fully articulates, Colin Young's ethnographically-engaged notion of the modern filmmaker as 'cultural producer' (Petrie 2011: 129).

ACT 3

Towards a working definition of Narrative Fiction Filmmaking Methodology

> 'This shouldn't be a book. You need more than words on a page to understand how film presents the world of the past' (Rosenstone 2006/2012: xvi).

This working definition is intended to open up a conversation, and contribute to a better understanding, of how filmmaking practice, of which screenwriting is a part, can generate and disseminate new knowledge. Such a definition will also provide guidance to scholars, irrespective of discipline, who wish to engage with filmmaking practice as a rigorous methodological approach to conducting their own enquiries.

This working definition also explicitly links screenwriting and screen production processes, despite these creative practices emerging as distinct fields within the academy. While I acknowledge the notion of a screenplay output as a (research) destination (Batty et al 2018), and how the writing of screenplays can be used to conduct enquiries within the academy, my practice as a writer/director employs screenwriting as one of a series of filmmaking *strategies.* Screenwriting as *strategy* folds in and out of the making of a film, a process described by Millard as 'cinematic scriptwriting' (Millard 2010: 13).

Mise-en-scène

A crucial step towards defining a filmmaking methodology, is to reach a clearer articulation of mise-en-scène, another core *strategy* in the process of making films, and once a core concept in the development of film studies (Gibbs 2002: 1-5).

Gibbs observes that many film studies textbooks now underestimate the importance of mise-en-scène, and even offer incorrect definitions of the term. A likely reason for this apparent neglect, is that mise-en-scène was, for some decades, pushed to the margins of film studies discourse by the post-structuralist debate concerning authorship. Implicit in the concept of mise-en-scène is authorial intent, so anti-intentionalism effectively broke the connection to the director, and removed her authority in the arbitration of meaning.

But, as Paul Sellors argues, the abandonment of authorship ended up taking a heavy toll on under-represented groups who were struggling to get their voices heard. 'In order to challenge norms of gender, race and sexuality, the capacity for individual expression was necessary' (Sellors 2010: 129). As a result, there has been a resurgent interest in (authorial) intentionality - an acceptance that the construction of moving images does come from somewhere - but one that has signalled a return to the pervasive auteurist assumption that the ‘authors’ of films are their directors (Cook 2007; Kipen 2006).

Scholars such as Sellors have challenged the notion of the single auteur, and argued for a new definition of filmmaking as a collaborative enterprise, or a collective intentional action, and that this collective intentional action is about communicating a meaning, 'of which the material film constitutes an expression conveying [said] meaning' (Sellors 2010: 110). I believe this definition of film authorship as collective action opens up the possibility of mise-en-scène coming to the fore as a means of re-linking the discourse between screenwriting, screen production and film and media studies.

Drawing from exemplar texts, John Gibbs' definition of mise-en-scène, in relation to film

studies, describes a complex concept centered on the elements that make up the cinematic frame and, in particular, the way these elements are organised. These elements include lighting, costume, colour, props, décor, action and performance, space, camera position and framing. Crucially, it is the way these elements interact, which has a vast number of variables, and the 'accumulative strategies' that the filmmaker employs in making these elements interact, that is significant in understanding their potential for expression (Gibbs 2002: 26).

Mise-en-scène in filmmaking practice

Echoing Gibbs' description of mise-en-scène in the field of screen studies, mise-en-scène in filmmaking practice is viewed as a holistic process of constructing (meaningful) moving images (Rabiger 2008: 347), and is one of the key terms, and strategies, used in the collaborative discourse between professional filmmakers (Katz 1991: 360)[2].

The construction of a meaningful moving image involves the interaction of multiple elements, including:

- production design;
- blocking (movement of actors);
- camera position, movement and composition
- lighting
- sound

(Rabiger 2008: 347)

Mise-en-scène, as applied in the process of filmmaking, is a problem-based reflective process that compels filmmakers to answer a myriad of questions. In other words, the application of mise-en-scène compels filmmakers to be critical thinkers. The conversations that arise from

this reflective process form what Gibbs refers to as 'accumulative strategies' (Gibbs 2002: 1-26), and these strategies are used to 'orchestrate' the elements, listed above, into complex aesthetic patterns (Elsaesser 1972: 442). At the scripting stage, this is most evident in the combining of rhythm, point-of-view, symbol, metaphor, motif, and dramatic devices such as foreshadowing, in the construction of dramatic situations (Rabiger 2009: 348).

For example, in Scene 4 of *My Brother, My Killer*, I employed mise-en-scène as a strategy to construct a scene that foreshadows Randolph's mortal battle with his siblings, promoter and manager, and the impact his demise will have on his daughters. During the scene, Randolph's young daughters watch a projected Standard-8 documentary film depicting their dad at the height of his fame. When a frame of the celluloid melts in the heat of the projector lamp, 'Randolph's brothers, manager and promoter warp into monstrous shapes that begin to devour the smiling boxer. Gwyneth points at the image and bursts into tears.' (Bentham 2021: 3-4).

The concept of mise-en-scène applied as a central strategy in screenwriting and screen production practice in this way, forms what Sellors refers to as the collective intentional action of expression (Sellors 2010: 110). And it is this intentional action of expression that generates affect.

Narrative fiction filmmaking methodology

Once filmmaking practice is understood as an interaction between a synthesis of storytelling knowhow - employing core storytelling strategies such as scriptwriting and mise-en-scène - and applied craftsmanship (Raskin 2018), a working definition of narrative fiction filmmaking methodology can be outlined.

The definition that follows is propositional and aspirational. That is, it is not a definition that reflects the breadth of approaches currently employed across all screen production, in all areas and across all platforms. Indeed, the pressure of production schedules in many daytime television drama shoots, for example, severely restricts the possibility of the implementation of mise-en-scène as a core strategy.

Equally, I resist over-determining the context in which the filmmaking takes place. That is, I believe there are many films that would qualify as research where, contextually, the authorial intent was not for the fiction work to be *doing* research. For example, the recent independent feature film, *Some Happy Day* (2021), written and directed by Catherine Hill, is a narrative fiction social justice feature film that generates and disseminates insights into contemporary homelessness in Australia. The film draws on 20 years' experience working with marginalised and street homeless men and women, and was produced partly through a process of participatory engagement. The texts that accompany the online marketing of the film amount to a basic research and impact statement so, although the film was not produced within a university context, the authorial intent, production process and cinematic output has clear equivalence.

Lastly, this working definition positions filmmaking (as research) as an ethical practice, and filmmaker as 'ethical subject' (Eakin 2009; Parker 2004; Taylor 1991) as an alternative to prescriptive media ethics models (Black et al. 2011; Deaver 1990). When screenwriters engage with an ethics of authenticity, it moves the locus of ethical evaluation towards authorial performance (Eakin, 2009: 78; Parker 2004: 53). Applied to the process of writing a biopic, a shift is made away from a fidelity-to-fact orientation, towards an *inter-subjective* relationship to the historical biographical referent. This (re)situates the screenwriter as ethical

subject, opening up a space of ethical reflection in which the screenwriter can make judgments about her creative practice. An ethics of authenticity, embedded within the Foucauldian 'dynamic space of invention' that Maras espouses (Maras 2016: 15), opens up profound storytelling possibilities for the screenwriter working in the fiction form of the biopic. One such possibility is to use narrative fiction to re-shape the past in order to give agency to victims of injustice, and hold perpetrators to account (Rosenstone, 1995: 129).

A working definition of narrative fiction filmmaking methodology

A narrative fiction filmmaking methodology situates the practitioner as 'ethical subject' (Eakin 2009; Parker 2004; Taylor 1991) in a collaborative and collective 'dynamic space of invention' (Maras 2016: 14-15). In this space of invention, where truth is grounded in ethical intent (Eakin 2009; McCann in Lackey 2018: 144; Taylor 1991: 29), filmmakers employ a range of methods (quantitative, qualitative, interpretative and performative), and a range of strategies (including scriptwriting) to conduct narrative enquiries through a dramatic (inter-subjective) process of the imagination (Mantel, 2017). The concept of mise-en-scène (Elsaesser 1972: 442; Gibbs 2002:1-26; Rabiger 2008: 347-368) is applied as a core reflexive strategy and, through a synthesis of storytelling knowhow (Raskin 2018), generates new knowledge in the form of narrative fiction (re)presentations, with metaphor viewed as a 'principal vehicle of understanding' (Lackoff & Johnson 1980: 160; McKee 1998: 375; Mantel 2017: Lecture 2, Lecture 5; Nichols 1991: 115-116; Walton 1990: 3). This knowledge is affective (Baker et al 2015; Batty et al 2018; Batty et al 2018b; Presence 2012; Shaviro 1993, 2008), opening up an alternative 'sensory' route to understanding the themes and issues being explored (Batty et al 2018: 6; Berkeley 2018; Mees & Murray, 2019: 1).

Conclusion

I believe a working definition of narrative fiction filmmaking methodology is essential in developing a scholarly discourse that aims to gain a fuller understanding of screenwriting and screen production outputs, forms and genres, including the biopic. I also believe that such a definition, where mise-en-scène operates as a core creative research strategy, has the potential to re-open, or 're-enchant' (Morris 2019), a constructive discourse regarding practice and theory in the fields of screenwriting, screen production and film and media studies. This definition also offers guidance to scholars, irrespective of discipline, who wish to engage with filmmaking as a rigorous methodological approach to conducting their own enquiries, and achieve greater impact through the effective use of one of the most powerful forms of mass communication.

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Biographical note

A graduate of the UK's National Film and Television School, Michael Bentham's work as a writer/director spans feature films, documentary and shorts. His recent feature drama, *Disclosure* (2020), was nominated for an Australian Academy Award (Best Indie Film) and Australian Directors' Guild Award (Best Direction), and won the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) Award for Best Fiction Feature Film. Michael's research activities at the University of South Australia are currently exploring the articulation and application of moving image narratives as methodology.

[1] Maras draws on the work of Michel Foucault, to define ethics as 'directed toward the problem of conducting oneself morally, viewed from the point of view of being an ethical subject rather than complying with a code'. Situating the screenwriter as 'ethical subject' opens up a space of reflection in which the screenwriter can make judgments about her practice, and then make decisions based on those judgments. Maras describes this as a *dynamic space of invention* (Maras, 2016, pp. 14-15).

[2] One of the key European pedagogic figures associated with mise-en-scène in filmmaking practice, is Professor Andrzej Mellin, based at the Polish National Film School in Lodz, who was a recipient of a CILECT Teaching Award in 2016.