

# Reflections on a Postdoctoral Career in Screen Production

(ASPERA 2012)

**Dr Leo Berkeley**

Associate Dean (Media, Journalism, Screen & Music)  
School of Media & Communication  
RMIT University  
VIC, Australia  
[leo.berkeley@rmit.edu.au](mailto:leo.berkeley@rmit.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

Having just completed a PhD involving the production of a feature-length drama and the writing of a 40,000 word exegesis, I am now regarded by the academic community as a qualified researcher. However, it is unclear whether there is a viable post-doctoral path for filmmakers who wish to develop their creative practice and have it considered as research. Given the practicalities of screen production, there seem to be many obstacles for screen production academics to find the necessary time to produce appropriate works in either the academic or external professional environment. The essay film, a form that can integrate creative and academic perspectives in a hybrid style and that can incorporate documentary, drama and personal reflection, seems to be a genre with potential to address many of the difficulties identified. This article will explore the relevance of this style of creative practice to the contemporary academic environment, in both conceptual and pragmatic terms.

## **Keywords**

Practice-based research, screen production, filmmaking, essay film, micro-budget, consumer media

## **Introduction**

I completed my PhD earlier this year and, since then, have been giving a lot of thought to what I should do now. My doctorate involved the production of a feature-length drama and the writing of a 40,000 word exegesis<sup>1</sup>. A big project but, as various people have reminded me, finishing a PhD is the start of a process, not the end of one. I am now regarded by the academic community as a qualified researcher in my discipline.

This article is therefore not so much about what I have done as what I plan to do in the future. It is about prospective research. It is also very much a personal perspective that reflects what I think is possible given the nature of my university, my position and my individual circumstances. However, I suspect the issues I am wrestling with may also be faced by others and, while they may decide to follow different paths in dealing with them, I think these issues are broadly relevant to the status of screen production as a research field and important to discuss. There is a concern, I think, that the discipline of screen production risks being marginalised within the higher education sector if it is seen as being no more than a teaching field. However, that means it needs to develop as a research discipline, and that means there needs to be a viable post-doctoral path for filmmakers who wish to develop their creative practice and have it considered as research. It is not clear to me whether such a path exists at the moment and what follows reflects my thinking about how to respond in this situation.

As an early career researcher now, the clear message from my university is to produce research outcomes, win external funding, join research groups, supervise and publish. All this suggests I need to define myself as a researcher. This message is not one I have any difficulty with. Even though I have a professional background as a filmmaker, I am and want to continue to be an academic. It is the nature of academic work to teach and research. However, within an academic discipline body like ASPERA (the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association), the challenges in reconciling the traditional definition of research with the activities of filmmaking are well known. My objective is therefore to come up with a strategy that meets the university's needs for research outputs with my needs as a creative practitioner. Put simply, how can I successfully make films that count as research?

## **Analysing the problem**

To make things clear, at this stage of my career, I do not want to regard myself as purely a filmmaker, making films in the industry the way I have in the past. For one thing, if it is hard to make films within universities, it does not seem to be much easier outside them. Whenever I get frustrated with life as an academic, I talk to colleagues who are trying to get a film project financed. The time commitment required to get any professional production through the scripting, development and financing process, as well as the uncertainty about the outcome, seem to be totally incompatible with the requirements of being a full-time academic. Nor, at this stage, do I want to be a researcher who does not make films. I could write about films or do audience research. There are opportunities to take all of these paths and, because they are established paths, in a number of respects it would be easier for me to follow them.

If the option of making a film external to the university sector is not a realistic one, what are my choices within it? I think my immediate answer would be ‘a lot better now than five years ago’. Now that the ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) initiative<sup>2</sup> recognizes creative works, and their standing as research is evaluated through peer review, a screen work considered as a research output should have as much merit as a text-based output, although whether this occurs in practice is more open to debate. The ERA peer review process has strict confidentiality conditions attached to it. While this is appropriate to ensure the credibility of the reviewing, it also means there is virtually no transparency around the issue of how creative works fare in their assessment in relation to more traditional research outputs.

I believe there are legitimate political and pragmatic concerns in how the ERA works, particularly as the assessment of creative works as research in this context is a new development. Not being excluded from the process is not the same as being meaningfully included. I suspect this is a bigger issue at the level of individual universities than at the Australian Research Council (as the administrators of ERA) but, because the process is almost completely opaque, it is hard to judge. When individual institutions assemble their 30% submission of outputs for FOR code 1902 (film, television and digital media), how are judgments made about the relative merit of books, book chapters, journal articles and creative works in presenting the quality of their research?

If the ERA becomes more heavily linked to government funding of research, this is going to become a major issue and it is one that I believe ASPERA could play a role in, lobbying and educating universities about how to meaningfully evaluate screen productions as research.

However, for the purposes of this article, the key point is that not all films count under the ERA. To count, a film has to be able to be considered as research, expressed through a 400 word research statement. It has to have been completed within the required period and be selected as part of the top 30% of research outputs in 1902, evaluated for its research quality against outputs from areas like cinema studies and digital media. At this stage, the people making these decisions may not always or often be screen practitioners, so there is a job to do in gaining recognition for the screen production component of the field.

Despite these challenges, it seems to me that making a screen work that meets ERA requirements is the appropriate approach to take, certainly in getting institutional support for devoting some of my workload to making films. If this is my strategy, my inclination is to make it a meaningful one. Based on my discussions about the ERA process within the screen production academic community, the research statement is viewed unfavorably, or at least uncomfortably, by some practitioners. In many cases, the process of articulating the research in the creative work does not come easily, or seem to be a natural part of the process. However, my own feeling is that the ERA is actually a major opportunity for screen production academics to claim ownership of the territory that has been opened up for us. The space I am referring to is one that does not wholly identify with either the values and practices of the established academy or the professional industry but involves making screen works that legitimately and convincingly can be expressed as research.

It seems to me that establishing an identity for screen production academics as a research community makes most sense by saying we make films but the films we make are different to those made in the industry. They may be similar in many respects and have many overlapping qualities but they are made under different circumstances, have different objectives, and often have different audiences (which is an issue I will return to). Another way of understanding this is for me to say I have a creative practice that involves conceiving of myself as a practitioner/academic, a familiar term that is already used by a number of filmmakers working in higher education but which I have to try and make sense of in relation to my own creative ideas and research interests.

To clarify my thinking to this point, as a postdoctoral screen production academic I have decided I need to make a film that counts as an ERA creative work. I have also decided to conceive of myself as a practitioner/academic. But what kinds of films reflect that role? In my prior practice, most of my focus has been on drama. Even with my interests in micro-budget and improvised approaches, the logistical demands of making something like a traditional screen drama are daunting. I have felt I need to move in a different direction if I want to make works that comfortably sit within the space I have been describing - and really make them, rather than just talk about it.

### **The essay film**

I have been increasingly focusing on the possibilities of the essay film as a form that can integrate creative and academic perspectives. It seems to be a genre with the potential to address many of the difficulties I have outlined. There has not been a large amount written on the essay film as a specific form, although there have been some significant contributions (Lopate, 1992; Arthur, 2003; Renov, 2004; Thompson, 2005; Millard, 2008; Corrigan, 2011). *The Essay Film* (Corrigan, 2011) is the first full-length book on the topic, discussing the previous writing on both the film essay and its literary equivalent, as well as the increasingly large number of films that can be associated with the form.

What has been written about the essay film stresses the uncertainties that surround this genre, including whether it is, in fact, a genre. Corrigan prefers to describe it as a 'film practice' (p. 5), highlighting the 'boundary crossing' qualities of many essay films. The essay film, he says 'may be fundamentally antigeneric, undoing its own drive towards categorization' (p. 8). Paul Arthur, writing in *Film Comment* in 2003, calls it 'a self-consciously liminal category' (p. 59). Renov (2004, p. 72) also highlights how the essay film can be understood as a form with the potential to reconcile taxonomic antinomies that exist in film scholarship between fiction and non-fiction, or documentary and the avant-garde. However, all these writers see this definitional slipperiness not as a limitation but as a strength. Corrigan states

*The difficulties in defining and explaining the essay are, in other words, the reasons that the essay is so productively inventive. Straddling fiction and non-fiction, news reports and confessional autobiography, documentaries and experimental film, they are, first, practices that undo and redo film form, visual perspectives, public geographies, temporal organizations, and notions of truth and judgment within the complexity of experience. (2011, pp. 4-5)*

Corrigan argues that what essay films have in common are three qualities: personal expression, public experience and the process of thinking (p. 14). In a less direct way, Arthur makes a similar point, describing how the ‘rhetorical focus’ (p. 60) in essay films is directed both outwards to the concrete facts of the world and inward to an explicitly personal process of reflection. He argues

*the essay offers a range of politically charged visions uniquely able to blend abstract ideas with concrete realities, the general case with specific notations of human experience. (Arthur, p. 58)*

What I think is significant about the essay film form is the scope it offers for criticality within a creative form. On the vexed question of what legitimates creative arts practice in an academic context, it can be argued that criticality is a key issue and that the essay film is a form that makes explicit a process of critical reflection in relation to the role of the filmmaker, the world of experience and the means of expression that is consistent with accepted methodologies and practices of academic research.

Corrigan, Renov and Arthur all argue that what separates the film essay from other forms of documentary is the active questioning by the filmmaker of their subject position and the sense they are able to make of the world. Arthur argues ‘essays confound the perception of untroubled authority or comprehensive knowledge that a singular mode of address projects onto a topic’ (p. 59). Renov (2004, pp. 70-71) also stresses the focus on ‘indeterminacy’ within the essayistic mode and how the form is defined by the way it problematizes and interrogates its own discourse. Corrigan perhaps puts it most succinctly when he says that the essay film explores and expresses ‘the fault line between the world and our knowledge of it’ (p. 46). This explicit focus on inquiry is another feature of the essay film that I would argue is consistent with the practice of academic research.

Corrigan includes an extensive number of films within what he defines as the essay film and mounts a strong argument in support of this. There are familiar examples from filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Werner Herzog and Ross McElwee, but also many films that are less well known and from directors not traditionally associated with the form, such as Alexander Kluge, Peter Greenaway and Raul Ruiz. Corrigan presents a taxonomy of different essay film modes, explaining the qualities of each, such as portrait essays, journey essays, diary essays and more. There is obviously great diversity here and, as a filmmaker who has not ventured into this territory before, a lot of creative possibilities.

However, returning to the central focus of this article, while the essay film provides a broad approach through which I can rethink my filmmaking practice in a postdoctoral environment, I also suspect I need to more precisely think through the issue of how the content and form of any essay film I make works as academic material. Put another way, what does an academic essay film look like? Is it different in any way, the way that academic writing is different from, for example, journalistic writing? There are three related issues that seem relevant here, to do with theory, content and evidence.

Stephen Maras has proposed a genre known as the ‘thesis-film’, which he describes as ‘film works that explicitly try to undertake a conceptual practice’, with conceptual practice understood as ‘acts and interventions in theory of the kind that crossover between the academy and the broader culture.’ (2004, p. 85) With my PhD, the theory I was engaging with was not in the film itself but in the writing that supported it and the way I conceptualised the production process. In that sense, I did not make what you would call an ‘academic’ film. Maras is obviously aware of the challenges of integrating theory in a film and is suggesting, I think, an approach found in some essay films, where the active process of thinking through a topic, theme or theory is reflected in both the form and content of the film. As he says ‘the nature of the thesis in the thesis-film is inseparable from its mode of expression’ (2004, p. 87).

Quotation and citation are important parts of academic writing and, with some of the ideas I have for essay films, I would like to do something similar in referencing other films to support an argument. The ‘fair dealing’ exception to copyright infringement under Australian law includes ‘review or criticism’, and ‘research or study’ (Australian Copyright Council, Fair Dealing, 2012). The Australian Copyright Council suggests that the publication of academic research falls outside the ‘research or study’ exception but the ‘criticism’ exception may be more suitable for the purposes I am proposing (Australian Copyright Council, Research or Study, 2012, p. 3-4). While the courts will only make a judgment in relation to the particular circumstances of each case in determining whether the use is ‘fair’, given that the use of copyright material in this context would be limited, non-commercial and with attribution, I believe a reasonable case could be made to support the ability to reference other films within the ambit of this exception. I would suggest that the ability to ‘quote’ from other films would greatly enhance the type of filmmaking being discussed.

Another issue I have been trying to resolve has to do with the content of whatever film it is that I make. At postdoctoral level, I am regarded as an expert in my academic field. That means if I am an expert in anything, it is screen production. However, my PhD film was about a pub but I would not want to claim to be an expert on pubs. While being aware that the form/content binary is problematic, I have wondered whether this means a film I make only speaks in an academic sense to the process through which it is made, rather than what it is about? To address this problem, I could make 'films on film' but I do not necessarily want to limit myself to this approach. I would rather make them on topics related to my personal experience and the world I live in, in all its social, political and cultural complexity. I could conceive of my research as interdisciplinary and say my research interests are in both screen production and anthropology.

I suspect this is the direction I may finish up going in and a recent book by Ben Highmore called *Ordinary Lives* (2011) has helped me in thinking this through. *Ordinary Lives* is about the aesthetics of everyday life, with aesthetics understood in the broader, older sense of the word, as being the study of sensory experience. To me, the branch of academic study that is about affect, and about aesthetics in this broader sense, has a lot to offer screen production as a discipline, as it focuses on a form of knowledge well-suited to film as a medium, more so than the deductive, logical knowledge that so much traditional academic work is premised on (Thrift, 2008; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Wood & Brown, 2011, 2012).

With my intention to make essay films about my personal experience, Highmore's work offers an approach to understanding this as a valid academic investigation, conducted through both critical and creative practice. While by no means the first person to address this issue, Highmore argues for the importance of both describing and understanding the details, objects, emotions and experiences of everyday life, and proposes rehabilitating the field of aesthetics as a way to do it. Creativity, Highmore argues 'is not some special realm of sensitivity and expression, but the daily business of making sense of the world around us, of reflecting on it, of narrating it and communicating to others' (p. 6). The mundane world has been a creative preoccupation of mine for a long time and I have felt that Highmore's work has allowed me to feel more confident about the conceptual basis for what I am doing.

Proposing to make a film conceived as an interdisciplinary work runs the risk of it not being acknowledged as research that belongs within the ERA code used for film production - FOR 1902 (Australian Research Council, 2012). However, consistent with the definitions of the essay film outlined previously (Corrigan, 2011; Arthur, 2003; Renov, 2004), my concept with these films is for them to be actively self-reflexive around the filmmaking process (visually and through voice-over). On this basis, I believe it will be valid through the accompanying research statement to argue for their status as research within the 1902 field. This argument will be enhanced through an approach to production that explores the formal and creative potential of new technology and filmmaking processes.

### **The practice of screen production**

My experiences as a filmmaker strongly suggests that the best creative ideas in the world do not amount to much if the conditions do not allow you to realize them (Bourdieu, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The pragmatics of essay film production seem to make sense for my circumstances as a busy academic but what other practical considerations are important? I am most definitely time-poor and the type of essay film I make will not be able to require a large crew (or possibly any crew). For the same reason, it should stylistically accommodate being produced in fragments, as devoting uninterrupted periods of time to the shooting of a film will rarely be possible.

An issue that is critically important to me is the duration of the production period. That films can so often take years to make is a major obstacle to my plans. If you are seeking external funding, the development process can be extremely time-consuming. On the other hand, if you are self-funding, the process can take a long time because you need to do most things yourself. I feel I will not have a very successful post-doctoral career as a filmmaker if I only make one production every five years. Therefore, one of the strict parameters I have set myself is to ensure I take an approach that allows me to complete one film per year. To me, the consequences of that decision are far-reaching and go to the length of the films I make, the scale of them, and the funding. Put another way, they have to be logistically simple, short and cheap.

Stylistically, I am planning to shoot on my smart phone, although I am still to fully establish whether I will be happy with the audio quality of interviews using this approach. However, if I can resolve these concerns, I would like to do it. The terrain in which I want to operate is that space opened up by new consumer media devices, what Jean Burgess calls vernacular creativity in the digital age (Burgess 2006), ‘the documentation of everyday life and the public sharing of that documentation’ (Jenkins 2007). However, it is also important to acknowledge that the blurring of professional and amateur characteristic of the digital era is not as novel as sometimes argued.

Jacques Rivette, when writing as a critic in the 1950s, proposed that some of Roberto Rossellini’s most famous films, such as *Voyage to Italy* (1954), are better understood as essay films. Not only that, he went on to state that ‘it is true that Rossellini’s films have more and more obviously become amateur films; home movies’ (p. 196, italics in original). Partly inspired by Rossellini’s example, my strategy is therefore to make little films that can be shot quickly and easily, that do not require funding and which explore my everyday personal experience.

The final issue I want to raise is also a significant one. It is sometimes claimed that research is not research unless it is published and I have always believed that a film is not a film unless it reaches an audience. Yet I feel the issue of audience for the kind of films I am discussing in this paper is not straightforward. Being a hard-nosed realist I would have to say the primary audience I am aiming at would be my academic peers in screen production. Hopefully others would find the work of interest but I would conceive of these productions as specialist works for that narrow audience.

In an era where the mass-audience, industrial model for cinema and television is being challenged, evaluations of success for screen productions are still strongly influenced by their ability to reach a sizeable audience, so I am concerned the films would be poorly evaluated on that basis. In many ways a similar argument would apply to experimental works so perhaps my concern is misplaced. It seems to me though that, at the moment, many films made in postgraduate and other academic contexts are aimed at two audiences and the criteria for success or failure are different.

Festival directors do not usually judge success in a screen work on the basis of its quality as academic research. However, if the focus is clearly on the status of the work as academic research, it is hard to defend making a film that is only seen by a handful of people. This is an unresolved issue for me and it is difficult to see a solution beyond developing the audience for the kind of works I am talking about, which is an indirect way of saying that my longer term objective would be to increase the size and impact of screen production as an academic discipline.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the questions I have raised in this article can only be resolved by making some films. My experience as a filmmaker suggests it is risky and unwise to talk too much about plans. Life, and certainly academic working life, too often gets in the way. On the other hand, at this stage, I also feel it is important for me to not only make films but be able to argue for the approach I am taking, both within my discipline and outside it. I am very aware that there is great diversity within this academic field, with many people not particularly interested in screen practice as research but also a wide range of interests and approaches amongst those that are.

However, I feel I need to make things myself to legitimate my status as an active researcher and what I have attempted in this article is to explain my thinking in how I can do this, conceptually and pragmatically. The objective of this strategy is to reduce or eliminate the tension between my creative and academic practices and I am looking forward to exploring the possibilities of achieving this in the near future.

## Reference List

- Arthur, P 2003, 'Essay questions from Alain Resnais to Michael Moore : Paul Arthur gives a crash course in nonfiction cinema's most rapidly evolving genre', *Film Comment*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 58-62.
- Australian Copyright Council 2012, Fair Dealing, Information Sheet G079v06, viewed 4 January 2013, <http://www.copyright.org.au/find-an-answer/browse-by-a-z>
- Australian Copyright Council 2012, *Research or Study*, Information Sheet G053v08, viewed 4 January 2013, <http://www.copyright.org.au/find-an-answer/browse-by-a-z/>.
- Australian Research Council 2012, *Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)*, viewed 18 May 2013, <http://www.arc.gov.au/era/>.
- Bourdieu, P 1993, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Burgess, J 2006, 'Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 201-214.
- Corrigan, T 2011, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M 1997, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Harper Collins, New York.
- Gregg, M & Seigworth, G 2010, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Highmore, B 2011, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Jenkins, H 2007, 'Vernacular Creativity': *An Interview with Jean Burgess (Part One)*, viewed 4 January 2013, [http://henryjenkins.org/2007/10/vernacular\\_creativity\\_an\\_inter.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/10/vernacular_creativity_an_inter.html)
- Lopate, P 1992, 'In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film', *The Threepenny Review*, No. 48, pp. 19-22.
- Maras, S 2004, 'Notes on a Genre to Come: Screenwriting and the 'thesis-film'.' *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 85-98.
- Millard, K 2008, 'Writing and Improvising the Digital Essay Film: the Boot Cake', in *2008 ASPERA Conference, July 14-16, RMIT University*, viewed 4 January 2013, <http://aspera.org.au/documents/research/millard2008.pdf>
- Renov, M 2004, *The Subject of Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Rivette, J 1955, 'Letter on Rossellini', in Hillier, J 1985, *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave, Vol. 1*, Routledge, Oxon, pp.192-204.
- Thompson, P 2005, *The Cinematic Essay*, Chicago Media Works, viewed 4 January 2013, [http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing\\_doc/3editing\\_docinematicessay.html](http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing_doc/3editing_docinematicessay.html)
- Thrift, N 2008, *Non-Representational Theory*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Wood, M & Brown S 2012, 'Film-based creative-arts enquiry: qualitative researchers as auteurs', *Qualitative Research Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 130-147.
- Wood, M & Brown S 2011, 'Lines of flight: everyday resistance along England's backbone', *Organization*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 517-539.

## End Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The feature film, *How To Change The World*, can be viewed in full at <https://vimeo.com/37150472>.

<sup>2</sup> Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assesses research quality within Australia's higher education institutions and is administered by the Australian Research Council, <http://www.arc.gov.au/era/>.