

**SCIENCES OF THE SPIRIT**

**A self-reflexive meditation on the creative process**

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I would like to commence this paper with a number of auto-ethnography remarks that touch on the question of why we are creative. I wish to do so using myself as the creative subject. I can describe myself as a musician, a filmmaker, an academic, a writer, a singer, a guitarist, a film editor, a cinematographer, a teacher, a student, and a performer – all roles I see as a creative. A creative is a person whose job involves creative work; the adjective relates to or involves the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something. The key characteristic of this description is its use of the word ‘job’, a ‘paid position of regular employment’. In my experience more often than not a paid position of regular employment has been the last place the creative process can take place or at least be nurtured or allowed to breathe. Amongst many jobs, I had the one year experience of working as a telephone operator in the billings department of a communications company where even when the lines were quiet you were not allowed to read even a magazine, let alone jot down notes on ideas etc. It was the antithesis of a creative breeding ground. Used as a noun, the word creative can also be thought of as, ‘being one who displays productive originality’. There is in all it seems an emphasis on creativity as an avenue that will achieve significant or useful results.

If we are here to argue that we can contribute to academia in our creative work, then the argument already appears to be rightly weighted in our favour. And yet we battle for recognition in many respects. R.D. Laing says that “Even the facts become fictions without adequate ways of seeing “the facts.” We do not need theories so much as the experience that is the source of the theory” (Laing, 1967, p. 3).

This is the space that I want to suggest we work in as a creative practitioners and scholars. It is what the work we produce can offer the academic world.

In this context the first question that I ask of myself is as follows:

Why do I preoccupy myself with all these creative pursuits? Or why do I occupy myself with them? The probable answer is that we need to be creative to be human and to compensate for the great deal of time spent on what could be called administrative life – whatever it is we have to do in order to keep our heads above water level: paying bills, the weekly food shop, rent, debts. Going to work, studying, driving, taking public transport, laundry, cleaning. There doesn't seem like much time to be creative. Less and less with each new year, month, even the days seem to herald a new, radical change in the order of things.

There is however nothing straightforward about the creative alternative and the problems are well illustrated by Berkoff's writing on Kafka:

In Kafka's *The Trial* there is the parable of a man who waits at the door of the law: he sits outside the door for years, waiting for what he believes will be his moment to be called and he is never called, and then one day he asks the doorkeeper why he has seen no one else enter the door of the law and the doorkeeper seeing that the man is near his end and very old, says, "The door was meant for only you. I am now going to shut it." The story of our lives... Suddenly its meaning became clear to me: we tend to wait for years for that golden opportunity when we will enter the door and find salvation, but we wait and put it off with all sorts of excuses. Yet at the same time we demand the fruits of that knowledge and experience. Why don't we enter that door that we claim is ours? Because we don't know what is lurking on the other side and so we stay with what is safe. (Berkoff, 1996, pp. 76-77)

Berkoff's consideration's illustrate my own creative predicament; a sense of that fight not to let negative thoughts dictate what I do. This sense is like a deeper knowledge that wants me to know what I can achieve as opposed to a barrage of thoughts telling me what I can't realize, that I should just stop and give up. This paper was presented in conjunction with a screening that attempts to address this very conundrum, starting with an overview of my own creative process.

I would like to discuss a film that is part of a larger project I am working on. To give you some background, I spent twenty years growing up in Hong Kong, an expatriate, before moving to Perth, Western Australia to live in 1993. I think it is fair to say I have been preoccupied with the memory of Hong Kong ever since, never quite feeling at home in Australia and always believing that a part of me was left behind.



*An image of the author aged five at Lai Chi Kok amusement park. Shot by his father on super 8mm film. Taken from the film Hong Kong 2005 (Ewing, 2010).*

I have in my possession approximately thirty to forty hours of personal home movies and videos. These are from Hong Kong and Australia, starting roughly from the age of four and running through to present day. The years spent in Australia (from 1993) are covered far more sporadically and are distinct from the previous footage that was primarily shot by my father.

After my parents' divorce either my brother or myself captured the images. I have been reviewing them over time looking for a number of stories and examples of how my family, and I hope many families represent themselves. The footage spans multiple formats: Super 8 (transferred to VHS), VHS camcorder recordings, Hi 8 video, and mini digital video. Each has their own aesthetic qualities that I am interested in but will not be discussing in detail in this paper. However it is important to note that, 'the coexistence of different images, different ways of seeing, different visual imaginations, may be seen as an imaginative resource' (Robins, 1995, p. 46), i.e. each different film or video stock has a special quality that itself manipulates the viewers perception of a moment in time or a space or place.

I have images from the same location taken across distinct years and on different formats and the experience of them visually is unique to each type. I have found this intriguing as I analyse what these images, these versions of my childhood may mean and how they have influenced my memories, how they are different, how they are the same, how they are the memory and where I can no longer be sure of the split. I also have a series of diaries and journals dating back to 1984 when I was eleven years old. I have started to transcribe these partly as a means of narration for the images, partly as a way of attempting to understand how and why I became a creative person, or as some might say, a practicing artist. I am also looking at the parallels between my family, my creative process, and my identity and in particular my own struggle with depression over most of my adult life.

I have to admit to being quite conflicted about revealing this aspect of my self but it seems intrinsically linked to my creativity. It is a precariously thin line between self-

obsession and what I am hoping for, an open and rewarding (for both writer and reader/viewer) experience. The film project will look at the themes of home, family, memory, loss, creativity, depression and ideally restoration and resolution. This personal dimension is arguably an essential element of creativity as I describe below.

The title of this paper comes from the Bruno Bettelheim book *Freud and Man's Soul*. In his book *Freud and Man's Soul*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses Freud's terms *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. The first refers to 'natural sciences', the pursuit that allows for reproduction of experiments and scenarios to confirm theories or repeated occurrences in nature. The latter is much harder to translate but he offers the term 'sciences of the spirit' and suggests he used it to describe that which occurs in the natural world but which is difficult if not impossible to recreate in the traditional sense of science (Bettelheim, 1982: 41). I was very moved and inspired by Bettelheim's reflections on elements of Freud's work and found a great deal that corresponded with my own praxis. As a filmmaker and musician tackling academic scholarship, I have often found myself in a limbo state between artistic endeavours and the reinterpretation of them into conventional academic discourse. The conference itself seems to be a nexus of *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. In regards to film and music, the term *Geisteswissenschaften* is a useful vehicle for the intellectual capacity of works of art that are intrinsically personal.

Bettelheim (1982) describes how Freud in the original German identified what is commonly referred as the 'ego', 'id' and 'superego' as 'the I', 'the it' and 'the above I'. He argues that Freud chose these personal descriptors because he was dealing with matters that were very personal to him. Freud's personal and intimate language also

alluded to the ‘soul’ as a key component of his work and in a way that draw parallels with what Laing describes in *The Politics of Experience*:

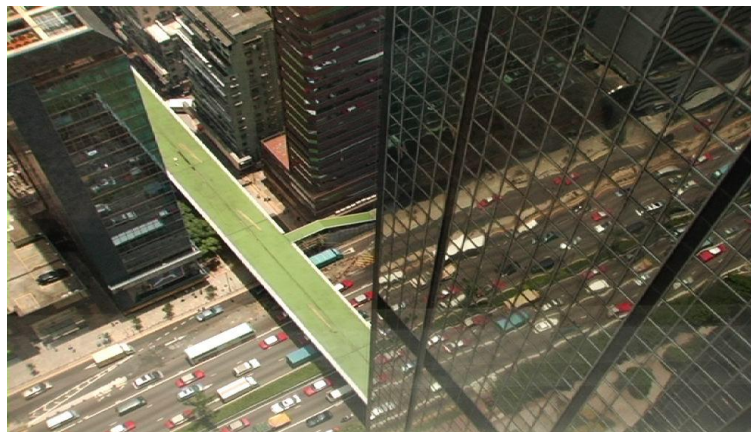
I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience is man’s invisibility to man. Experience used to be called the Soul. Experience as invisibility of man to man is at the same time more evident than anything. Only experience is evident. Experience is the only evidence. Natural science knows nothing of the relation between behaviour and experience. The nature of this relation is mysterious – in Marcel’s sense. That is to say, it is not an objective problem. There is no traditional logic to express it. There is no developed method of understanding its nature. (Laing, 1967, pp. 4-5)

This type of personal and experientially based “sciences of the spirit” seem to me close to where we as creative filmmakers, writers, dancers, musicians can position ourselves.

If I take a moment to reflect on the activity of making the film that this paper in part examines, so much seems to lie in this space. Science certainly takes steps towards quantifying music and the dance of pixels on the screen. Physicists are making the analogy between String Theory and music – that music may very well be at the core of all matter (Smilow & Mannes, 2009). Most musicians would agree. When you edit film with music, there is a magic that happens. Movement on screen will synthesise with melody and rhythm. Eighteen months ago I screened a tape of raw footage, the television volume tuned down and the soundtrack to the French film, *Un Coeur en Hiver* (Carcassonne, Livi & Sautet, 1992) playing – Ravel. The footage I shot five years ago on a trip back to Hong Kong, my first in ten years, a proposed project partly

made up of a series of interviews that would document the experience of growing up in Hong Kong. I came back very unhappy with the footage I shot, in particular the interviews that for the most part felt forced, lacked the intimacy the material required. After logging over thirty hours of footage, the project was abandoned. The images, the same ones I had watched three years previously came to life during this intimate screening, the music and image sang and danced. It is not within the scope of this paper to offer up a hypothesis as to how this occurred , although a note or collection of notes does not referentially signify a subject or narrative in the way a word or sentence abstractly connects our minds to an idea, memory or experience (Brophy, 2008, pp. 432-433), this fusion of notes and images seemed to do just that. They ‘made sense’.

Perhaps it all sounds overly romantic; but it is a way to describe what we as creative thinkers do – or perhaps I will for now restrict that description to myself.



*One of the first images to synergise with Ravel’s music. Image taken from the film  
Hong Kong 2005 (Ewing, 2010)*

Bettelheim (1982, p. 86) dissects Freud’s term *Fehlleistungen* suggesting it is best rendered as ‘faulty achievement’, its two original German words meaning accomplishment, achievement (*Leistung*) and an indication of an achievement that



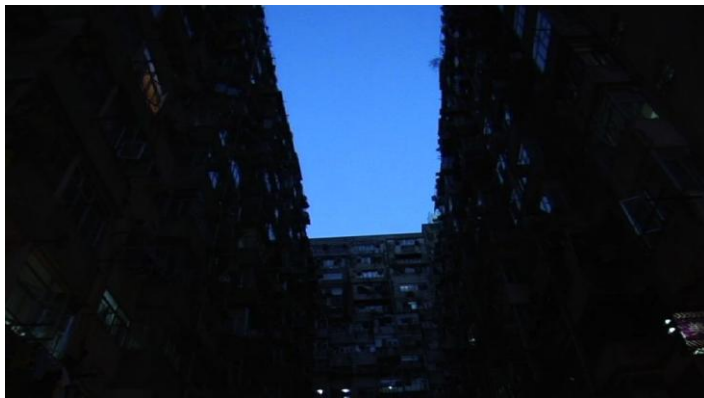
somehow failed (*Fehl*). What happens in this ‘faulty achievement’ occurs simultaneously – albeit on different levels of consciousness. More than an abstract concept it is a term that “gives German readers an immediate feeling of admiration for the cleverness and ingenuity of the unconscious processes without the reader losing sight of the fact that the end result of those processes is a mistake” (Bettelheim, 1982, p. 87). He makes an example of when we forget an appointment, we know that forgetting it was an error, but also feel somehow we probably wanted to avoid keeping the appointment. Perhaps more in line with the aforementioned idea of *Geisteswissenschaften* he suggests that when we make an error in talking we frequently feel that what we said is right, though we also somehow know it is wrong. The synergy between images and music could be thought of as an inversion of this: what we say is wrong but we know that somehow it is right. I often instruct students to keep an eye out for the technical mistakes they make in filming and editing – often they lead to great surprises in image creation and story-telling that one can never predetermine – faulty achievements, sciences of the spirit.

Reflecting on my personal practice, creativity is a constant battle. A battle, actually it may be best to describe it as a war, with self-doubt, insecurity, and self-loathing. As I have transcribed my journals and diaries I have been hit by the constant tone of low self-esteem. I took this as a normal part of adolescence but I have seen it manifested throughout the last twenty years of my life. There could be said to be a symbiotic relationship between the ‘black dog’ as Winston Churchill dubbed it and my creative life and output. And I know I am certainly not alone in this and the film and its accompanying research is looking at this relationship and attempting to better

understand it – comprehend our fascination with the dark side and what may be a tendency to drift towards it, to stay in it as a creative person.

It seemed to me that the friends and artists I felt this magnetic resonance with all had this sort of fire inside. Like Icarus, we had this strange fascination with how far into the light one could go and still come back. But we rarely spoke of these things, because we didn't need to. We had done it. We had lost control of our lives at some point, and visible or not, it had left a mark. (Chapadjiev, 2010, p. 10)

As a way of concluding this paper I should say that the doubts I have about this project are that it may be too insular, too much about myself, a self-help exercise as opposed to a rigorous academic analysis. My counter argument (with my self) is that without looking at creativity from an auto-ethnographic perspective, myself under a microscope, I cannot begin to imagine a break out of the “knots, tangles, fankles, impasses, disjunctions, whirligogs, binds” (Laing, 1970). A great deal of script writers have said to me that writing like this is self-indulgent, lacks creativity, story-telling, narrative ingenuity. McKee warns of the lack of structure and seeing ‘only what is visible and factual, . . . blind to the truth of life’ (1999, p. 24). I suppose I see so many people busy with administrating their lives, I might see filmmaking that follows a formula as more of the same. “In every art there is a diabolical principle which acts against it and tries to demolish it. An analogous principle is perhaps not altogether unfavourable to cinematography” (Bresson, 1975, p. 39). I'm not convinced by either argument but for someone who has spent a great deal of time in a holding pattern, creativity is about taking risks and moving forward. It has to be.



*Image taken from Hong Kong 2005 (Ewing, 2010)*

With this introduction I now wish to present a collage of my own film and musical practice as evidence of this science of the spirit or perhaps knowledge of the soul.

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