

An Invigorating Shake?

Tony Downunt

A paper on the UK debate about AVPhDs delivered at the DIEGETIC LIFE FORMS AND DIEGETIC LOGIC: ASSESSING IMAGE-BASED SCHOLARSHIP CONFERENCE - 6 July 2009 at VCA, Melbourne

I am currently the Course Convenor for MA Screen Documentary at Goldsmiths, University of London – so I teach aspiring documentary makers as well as co-supervising PhD students working on projects that involve media practice. For much of my working life I worked as a documentary filmmaker, first in community and political video activism, then as a producer (predominantly for Channel 4). I have taught at MA level for the last 20 years. From 2003-2006 I have had an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts, which included the production of an experimental video-diary film, *A Whited Sepulchre*. I am a founding member, also serving on the Steering Group of AVPhD¹, an AHRC funded training and support network for all those doing, supervising and examining audio-visual practice based doctorates. Starting in September 2005, AVPhD has mounted more than a dozen events across the UK and Ireland; the practice research projects covered, include (but are not restricted to) documentary, fiction, narrative/non-narrative film, non-linear and new media.

So I am making a slow journey from being a media practitioner, to being an academic – and probably will always be stuck, somewhere in the middle. Most of what I am saying here comes through the lens of that history, and from my own experience of supervision as well as currently doing my own (AV) PhD, based on my fellowship film, *A Whited Sepulchre*.

I took my title for this talk from this extract from Jonas Mekas' (text rather than film) diary

I Had Nowhere to Go:

No, I have no thirst for knowing it all.

But I know 1000 songs that I have learned in my village.

Their words and melodies are in the deepest atoms of my body.

Professors:

Stand up and shake your bodies.

An invigorating shake.

And then stand quietly and listen.

Can you hear any songs coming back from the depths of your flesh? ²

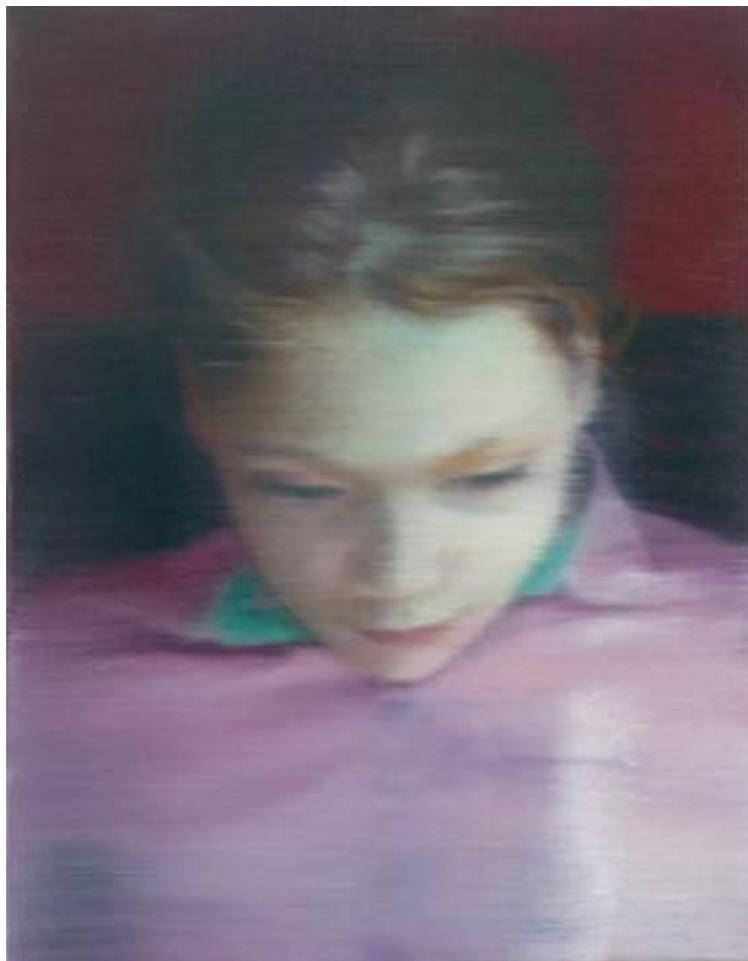
Mekas wrote this in 1947, before he emigrated to the US and became a filmmaker in New York. I like it because it celebrates the different ways of knowing - the 'alternative epistemologies' - that practice-based research work in moving image and sound offer - as a supplement – or a challenge - to routine text based academic conventions. The passage, to me, also suggests the joy of the embodied knowing, that comes from doing and making as opposed to just thinking and writing. In his discussion of painting, Merleau-Ponty makes the point that

[...] we cannot imagine how a *mind* [original emphasis] could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings [or, I add, - the filmmaker turns the world into sounds and images]. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.³

In this talk I will give a brief history of the UK debate around the theory and practice of doctoral work involving the submission of audio-visual (alongside textual) elements: I want to illuminate in what ways, the Academy has been 'shaken' - or at least stirred – by these new practices.

Before getting on to AVPhDs, I'll try to put our work into the broader context of

practice research in the Arts and Humanities in the UK. I want to locate the debate in what I'll describe here as the struggle between pictures and words – between visual and verbal epistemology - which I'm sure we've all come across in our work in universities. At one end of a spectrum we have statements like this from visual artist Gerhard Richter: 'Pictures which are interpretable and which have a meaning are bad pictures'⁴ This assertion clearly poses a problem for people like ourselves involved in research: commonly defined as something along the lines of the production of new knowledge. The problem is that if 'good' pictures are essentially meaningless and if good *should* be 'uninterruptible', how will they be able to contribute to knowledge and understanding?



'Ella' by Gerhard Richter

Certainly my own *felt* response to pictures, paintings or films that I enjoy is that in some way I have gained new knowledge, or insight, from my interaction with them. Maybe what Richter was contesting is the notion that 'good' pictures can be effectively interpreted in verbal language, or has 'meanings' that can be illuminated properly in

written text; asserting that the ‘meaning’ of a good picture is there fully in its visual qualities, and is not reducible to words.

The ramifications of this opposition of the verbal and the visual have been played out for a long time in the UK in Art schools – before AVPhDs existed – notably in the argument in the late 1990s between Christopher Frayling and Colin Painter about the status of Art practice (in relation to written work) in Fine Art doctorates⁵. Frayling’s position was that:

Significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. But that for the claim to be sustainable it had to be accompanied by a piece of rigorous and demanding written work.⁶

It is this imperative (that works of art can *only* qualify as research when accompanied by text) that lies at the heart of their debate and disagreement, and is derived from their differing perceptions of the activity of research. Painter is keen to move away from the more traditionally ‘scientific’ and empirical definitions, embracing the subjectivity he sees increasingly validated in other disciplines, such as qualitative sociology or anthropology. In their debate Frayling characterises research as

"a systematic enquiry whose goal is communicable knowledge". ... Systematic because the procedures have to be clear when producing a piece of work involving certain discoveries; someone who starts from the same point should not have to do the same work again.

And Colin Painter replies:

Or, if they did, should get exactly the same results... This is the idea of ‘verification’, which is one thing in laboratory experiments, but quite a different thing for the disciplines I’ve just mentioned.... It is not possible to verify someone’s account of their understanding of a particular culture or historical period in the same way that you can a laboratory experiment.⁷ (Frayling, Greenhalgh, Painter 1996:7)

There was a parallel debate to this one in the field of Design, stimulated by Ken Friedman, Associate Professor of Leadership and Strategic Design at the Norwegian School of Management. He issued a challenge on PhD-Design e-mailing list ‘to win the Design Thinking Prize’ with the question: ‘Is it possible in principle to create a "self-explanatory" artefact that also constitutes a full research report without the need of an accompanying statement? If it is, prove it.’⁸ His position was that it was

... Impossible to create a "self-explanatory" artefact.... This will not be possible until an artefact can be said to possess consciousness. Until we are ready to agree that an artefact can explain itself in the way that a human being can do, there can be no self-explanatory object.⁹

It’s perhaps a lot easier for us to see how a film might ‘possess consciousness’ than the ‘mute objects’ that result from design processes, and it is interesting that Jean Schneider, one of Friedman’s correspondents in the PhD-Design list’ argues that Vertov’s ‘Man with a Movie Camera’

... would fit with most of the criteria that you put up. Of course, this is valid if you accept that the answer to the criteria might be non-verbal, I mean by that: in the same medium as the form itself. (Friedman 2002)¹⁰

The question opened up here is, of course, crucial: whether and how films can answer ‘research questions’ – or make meaning - non-verbally (as they have to do, because they are not written texts).

There is a growing feeling that we are hindered in finding positive answers here because of the academic and intellectual traditions that have surrounded the discussion of image based work. So the Canadian academic Ron Burnett writes that he is

concerned with the fact that many of the debates about the media in general ...refer to electronic images as if they are texts. ...most discussions of electronic images talk about the "reading" of image-texts as if there were continuity, at a formal and content level, between image and language.¹¹

And the Australian anthropological filmmaker David MacDougall believes that

... it is an error [...] to apply communications theory too literally to films by looking upon them as messages. A film is not ephemeral like a telephone call but remains to be re-used and re-viewed. It is perhaps less like a message than like a cultural artefact such as a table or chair, and like them it retains the grain of the materials from which it was made.¹²

Those of you who know MacDougall's writing will be aware that he is dedicated to the task of explaining why and how anthropological filmmaking challenges established (textual) anthropological discourse, because of the contrast between film and writing as communicative devices:

There is a profound difference between viewing photochemically produced images of objects and reading the signs of written language that represent them. The sign (the word) is at once undifferentiated compared to the image, which remains specific and continually asserts complexities that defy simple interpretation. Film images thus pose a challenge to the processes of language that classify objects and behavioural acts.¹³

MacDougall's argument is that filmmaking is, for some kinds of understanding, a more legitimate way of doing (in his case, anthropological) research, because of how film, as a visual medium, offers significant challenges to verbal culture. In an earlier chapter he points out that:

For many filmmakers... documentary is not just a way of representing the real but of touching within themselves and others something more fleeting and more precious... It is what we wait for when watching a film a second time, as we wait for certain moments in music. It may lie in a gesture, a look, in the catch of a voice, a puff of smoke, or a distant sound that animates a landscape. This moment may be regarded as what is quintessentially filmic in film.¹⁴

MacDougall describes how film as a medium draws on embodied experience, at the moment of both production and reception:

Film seeks to retrieve certain abandoned habits of our pre-linguistic life, the perceptions which as children were part of our bodily awareness of others and the physical world. It thus regenerates a form of thinking through the body, often

affecting us most forcefully at those junctures of experience that lie between our accustomed categories of thought.¹⁵

I particularly like that phrase ‘thinking through the body’ as a description of practice research, reminiscent as it is of Merleau-Ponty’s phrase about the artist ‘lending his body to the world’¹⁶.

All these issues have been thoroughly debated in the AVPhD events we held – the Frayling/Painter debate for instance was echoed by Victor Burgin in a keynote address at the first AVPhD event. Burgin quoted Derrida – with approval – when he rejected a videocassette in place of a paper, submitted by a student.

Derrida described how he said to the student:

“If your film had been accompanied – or articulated with – a discourse refined according to the norms that matter to me, then I would have been more receptive, but this was not the case, what you are proposing to me is coming in the place of discourse but does not adequately replace it”¹⁷.

Following this logic, Burgin’s conclusion was that ‘there should be three distinct kinds of ‘terminal degree’ in visual arts:

- 1) a PhD, which would require a thesis comparable in length and scholarly depth to a PhD in a Humanities department.
- 2) a PhD with a long written essay – albeit half the length required for the history and theory emphasis – and a substantial body of practical work. For assessment there would be equal emphasis on the writing and the visual work (by the way, this is the normal pattern in UK universities).
- 3) and a Doctor of Fine Arts degree for those who are interested in ideas and draw upon historical and theoretical writings, but have little aptitude for, or interest in, constructing lengthy written arguments. For purposes of assessment, emphasis would be on the practical work. For the final examination, these students would submit short essays,

notes and bibliographies, rather than a structured thesis.¹⁸

On the other hand, Des Bell - taking the Painter role in opposition to Burgin's Frayling - locates Burgin's argument as operating within what he describes as the deeply entrenched social division between intellectual and manual labour in capitalist society¹⁹ - in other words between the work of the mind and the work of the body. Bell says that what he calls Burgin's 'hierarchy' of types of PhD – the pure text version at number 1 - reproduces this division between mind and body, practice and theory. Bell proposes moving beyond the polarized binary of, on the one hand –

- fretting about the stipulated word length for written components of practice based PhDs, or defending the primacy of the art object as a stand-alone codification of new knowledge ..

He suggests instead we 'encourage a circle of reading making, documenting, reflecting, writing up, public communication and criticism' – which he describes as a 'virtuous hermeneutical circle' of critically informed practice'.²⁰

These debates still persist across the European Academic community. To give two very different examples:

1) At Malmö University in Sweden the MEDEA initiative sees itself as 'bringing media studies and interaction design together ..' Their highly practice based approach derives from 'how much the mediascape has changed in a relatively short time' and their mission is 'to explore the full communicative potentials of the new media, and particularly the interactivity and participation possibilities that they entail'²¹. However when Bo Reimer from MEDEA talked at Goldsmiths – which has a long history in media and cultural theory - it was clear that at least for some of us, bringing 'media studies and interaction design' together wasn't entirely successful – some people felt that they were in danger of sacrificing media studies academic rigour for a practice based technological utopianism.

2) The debate is also continuing in a series of seminars but on by the University of London's Institute of Education, called New Forms of Doctorate – with the aim of 'exploring the intellectual and practical opportunities, problems and risks concerning

the rise in digital and multimodal research presentation – particularly that of the PhD thesis'²². One of the papers presented here – ‘Defending the Thesis: why the written thesis is now a better idea than ever’ – was, clearly, a vigorous defence of the written PhD thesis - but coming from an interesting ‘new media’ angle.

The author, Stephen Boyd Davis, reasserts some of the points Derrida and Burgin make about the supremacy of words - because for him the written thesis is supposed to facilitate structured argument. Where, as we’ve seen, MacDougall celebrates the fact that ‘the image...continually asserts complexities that defy simple interpretation’²³ Boyd Davis sees this ability of film to yield ‘too many different meanings’ as a liability in an academic thesis.

He asserts his view in a contemporary ‘new media’ context – so he argues that above all that the written thesis is a visual medium (with the important affordances that this confers) and that the world digital environment in which each thesis is now situated means that the old objections to the unread dusty volume on the library shelf are a thing of the past.

I think that what’s happening - within AVPhD and the wider academic community in the UK – is that we are moving away from the rigid text/artefact – verbal/visual binary towards a pluralism that assesses the balance between making and writing on a case by case basis – albeit within some often prescriptive regulatory institutional constraints - there are no rigid national standards in the UK.

So the questions that preoccupy us now are: how is this knowledge in our field best generated and communicated? Or how can we best facilitate structured argument, with what balance of visual and textual elements? But some of us aren’t sure that ‘argument’ is the best word: for instance Professor Robin Nelson, who thinks that:

a lot of Practice as Research PhDs is not primarily about making an argument. I think we need to think of different models of knowledge for certain kind of practice research PhDs and certainly we’re looking for scholarship and all the things we’d associate with a PhD, but I’m not sure whether making an argument,

as it were, leading to a conclusion in a scientific tradition is always the appropriate model.²⁴

He made this remark at an AVPhD session specifically for supervisors and examiners – (held on April 1st, so we called it a ‘Fools Day’). Another participant, Mark Bartlett from the San Francisco Art Institute, added to Robin’s point as follows:

Maybe demonstration is the more proper term than argument in this particular area. (an) AVPhD offers the chance to make demonstrations of knowledge, visually and aurally, in the way images and sound are presented in the thesis document. One can also “argue” using visual and sonic materials, but I think the distinction between demonstration and argument may be useful at times.²⁵

I think that it’s possible that the differences between demonstration & argument are being resolved in the various digital techniques people are using to disseminate their research outcomes. A couple of years ago I wrote about this in relation to my own work in an optimistic piece called ‘Waves of Potentiality’²⁶.

I suggested that it’s now possible to move beyond the familiar text/film polarity – the conflict over whether (or to what extent) a film needs text accompaniment to make it a bona fide research outcome. I was working on the assumption that ‘new’/digital/ media have (at least in theory) made the distinction redundant. At a very literal level everything’s now coded in 0s & 1s, so all academic practitioners are involved in digital text production – whether in Word, PowerPoint, Final Cut Pro or Protools. Moving pictures, sounds, text and stills can be included in the same artefact, and presented on screens. So digitisation liberates us to ask a more basic and useful question: what (for us as P/R practitioners in moving image) is the appropriate material form for an academic research outcome, given these technological developments?

I assume that we are seeking new forms of academic ‘text/image-production’ that can both fulfil the objective of making our research processes transparent to other researchers, but also, crucially, are able to convey the nuances and textures of work that has been originated (at least partially) through audio-visual (rather than text-print) media. ‘New’/digital media (DVDs, websites etc) clearly offer ways of doing that.

The evidence is also that we are not alone here – as the New Forms of Doctorate seminars indicate – the nature and form of PhDs are changing in a range of academic disciplines, are changing – and there are ways that our thinking in practice/research prefigures challenges to the PhD degrees as a whole, as Blake and Harbord assert in their dissection of the equation $AV + PhD = AVPhD$: ‘. the addition of AV to PhD problematises the original term by revealing within it an emptiness which the supplement comes to haunt’²⁷.

They came to this conclusion by taking a close look at anthropologist Margaret Mead’s use of still and moving cameras in Bali, extrapolating from her case that ‘the use of audio-visual tools affects a change in the subject studied that is different from (and perhaps supplementary to) that affected through writing’²⁸.

So adding the moving image to text in a PhD submission potentially transforms the whole doctoral enterprise – giving it, to recollect Mekas’ phrase, ‘a really Invigorating shake’.

However I think it’s also important to say that AVPhDs are still at a very early and experimental stage of development - in which no one can pretend to have all the answers. So I’ll leave you with a quote from another participant in the AVPhD Fools day, David Smith from Newport School of Art, who, in a discussion about the current complexities involved in training for AVPhDs, acknowledged that ‘..it’s all mutuality of ignorance’²⁹.

¹ The label ‘AVPhD’ came out of a long debate. Some of us on the Steering group felt that ‘moving image’ was preferable as a descriptive phrase than ‘audio visual’ (with its undertone of instrumental, ‘educational’ media use). In the end we the arguments that swayed us were to do with the need for a phrase that encompassed most media forms (‘new’/digital and old), and, crucially, gave the commonly undervalued area of sound equal billing. Now, strangely, it seems to be becoming an accepted descriptive phrase for the activity itself in the UK: for example, ‘I’m doing an AVPhD ..’

² Mekas, J, (1991) *I Had Nowhere to Go* New York: Black Thistle Press, p119

³ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, p162

⁴ Quoted by Moira Weigel in Guardian Review - ‘Grand Illusion’ 25.04.09 p18

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- ⁵ What follows here is a summary of an argument I made more fully in: Downmunt, T. (2003) 'A WHITED SEPULCHRE: Autobiographical Film/Video as Practice Research', *The Journal of Media Practice*, Volume 4, No 1, pp 17-26
- ⁶ Surrey Institute of Art & Design (1998) *Transcript of Research Seminar on Practice-Based Doctorates in Creative & Performing Arts & Design* (Farnham: Surrey Institute), p8
- ⁷ Frayling, C, Greenhalgh, P & Painter, C (1996) *An Art Version of the Gadarene Swine* in *POINT – Art & Design Research Journal* no 3 (London: CHEAD), p7
- ⁸ Friedman, K (2002) E-mail communication of the thread from PHD-DESIGN@JISCMAIL.AC.UK
- ⁹ Friedman – PhD Design Jiscmail
- ¹⁰ Friedman - PhD Design Jiscmail
- ¹¹ Burnett, R (1995) *Cultures of Vision: Images, Media and the Imaginary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p236
- ¹² MacDougall, David (1998) *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) p97
- ¹³ MacDougall *Transcultural Cinema* p190
- ¹⁴ MacDougall *Transcultural Cinema* p49
- ¹⁵ MacDougall *Transcultural Cinema* p49
- ¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p162
- ¹⁷ Burgin, Victor. 2006 'Thoughts on 'research' degrees in visual arts departments.' *Journal of Media Practice* 7 (2): 101-108, p106 (paper also available as a PDF from www.avphd.ac.uk/events.php)
- ¹⁸ Burgin, 'Thoughts on 'research' degrees ..' pp106-107
- ¹⁹ Bell, Desmond. 2008. 'Is There a Doctor in the House? a Riposte to Victor Burgin on Practice-Based Arts and Audiovisual Research' *Journal of Media Practice* 9 (2): 171-177, p171
- ²⁰ Bell, 'Is There a Doctor in the House?' p177
- ²¹ <http://www.mahbloggen.se/medea/> accessed 2/07/09
- ²² <http://newdoctorates.blogspot.com/> - accessed 19/09/09
- ²³ This – and all the following quotation - are from <http://newdoctorates.blogspot.com/> (text and slide show) - accessed 19/09/09
- ²⁴ 'Fools' Transcription on www.avphd.ac.uk/events.php#5, p17
- ²⁵ 'Fools' Transcription, p25
- ²⁶ Downmunt, Tony. (2007) 'Waves of Potentiality: some thoughts on database narratives and the dissemination of audio-visual practice research'. *Journal of Media Practice* 8: 1, pp 39-48
- ²⁷ Blake, T. & Harbord, J. (2008) 'Typewriters, cameras and love affairs: the fateful haunting of Margaret Mead', *Journal of Media Practice* 9.3 pp 215-227, p226-7
- ²⁸ Blake & Harbord, 'Typewriters, cameras..', p226
- ²⁹ 'Fools' Transcription on www.avphd.ac.uk/events.php#5, p45