Defining the Limits of Screen Production as a Discipline

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Postgraduate research programs in screen production are now commonplace in Australian universities – these were reported in around 30 institutions.[1] The sector has grown rapidly in the last 15 years and yet it is still not entirely understood by the wider academic community. Its growth has not been accompanied by a commensurate adjustment of academic regulations, which for the most part continue to be based on the established paradigms of scholarship and on empirical, scientific and written conventions.[2]

On the conventional scholarship side there is an increasing acceptance that practice-based creative arts scholarship is a valid way of approaching certain research questions. Similarly, the creative arts sector has gone some way towards accommodating conventional scholarship methodologies.

As a result of this scholarly accommodation, contemporary academia operates on two strands of scholarship: the established strand of conventional scholarship and the emerging strand of creative arts scholarship.

Methodology

The coexistence of these two strands of scholarship within academia rests on many unresolved issues and presuppositions. For example, conventional scholarship has reasonably articulate, seemingly predictable, objective and verifiable methodologies. Can we say something similar for the methodologies of the creative arts sector? Can these methodologies be described, measured, prescribed? How can such work be evaluated? What are the observables, the evidence and the verification processes of creative methods? What is the role of subjectivity, emotion, sensuality, audience and impact in this verification? This type of research output is still considered by many academics as being essentially sensual, subjective and not all that scholarly. Problems of evaluating practice-based research of this kind bring into question existing academic regulations, notions of authorship, validation procedures, concepts of originality, and even the very notion of academic practice.

If we are to set screen production research on a firm philosophical and institutional basis, the differences between the visual mode of "writing" with all its drama, emotions, subjectivity and sensuality, and conventional academic writing needs to be resolved.

If screen production research and postgraduate research is to flourish, the foundation of the discipline needs to be consolidated.

Defining the Discipline

There are many image-making activities that do not explicitly invoke screen production. For example mediated images are the foundation of much that is the computer, IT, simulation and games industries. Images are used to communicate a plethora of disciplines from museum displays, ethnography, ancient history, medicine, biology, wildlife zoology, marine science, forensic science to name a few. Do all these images belong to the discipline of screen production?

If the sector were to decide that all these practices do belong to screen production it would face the risk that every recorded, mediated, animated and rendered image would be deemed an element of the screen production discipline? Potentially there is a risk that the discipline would be defined by the audio-visual medium itself. Even CCTV recordings may have to be considered as an element of the screen production discipline.

Historically, there was indeed a tendency within academia to define screen production as an audio-visual craft, probably because until quite recently created images were not all that plentiful. For example photographs that are older than 100 years are comparatively rare and moving pictures even more so. There is, however, no shortage of visual material at the present moment. Rather, the opposite is the case – images are to be found everywhere and on every topic. Not all of these images should be embraced by the screen production discipline. For all these reasons it may be timely for screen producers to reconsider the limits of what they do as a discipline and redefine their discipline afresh.

Practice-based research

Screen production is a complex and collaborative activity best described schematically with Figure 1.
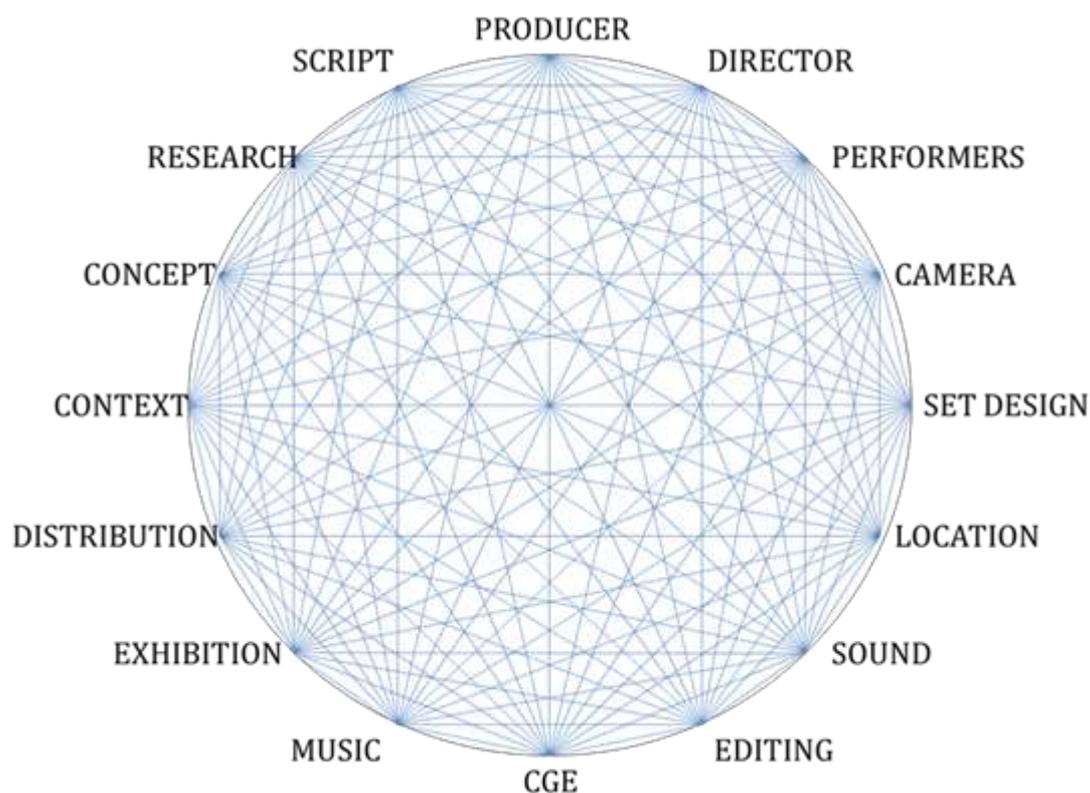

Figure 1 Schematic depiction of interconnections in the production process

The defining element of screen production in this diagram is at the centre of this circle where all the filmic codes converge together. The individual codes are always meaningful in the context of this overall effect. They only have a value when they add to the phenomenological experience of the production.

Cinematic Experience – Diegetic Form of Life

There is a moment when the "magic" of this orchestra of codes is activated. Every editor is familiar with the moment when this magic comes into existence; suddenly everything seems to fall into place and the filmic diegesis comes alive. At that moment we no longer feel that we are watching a collection of fragmented performances or beholding an artificial narrative. Instead a virtual world unfolds before us that seems in every way life-like, sufficiently so for us to feel that we are beholding an abstract (diegetic) form of life.

Research on Creative Practice

It is all too easy to forget this phenomenological aspect of the filmic experience when studying creative practice such as screen production. When this happens the multidimensional logic of the film's experience collapses, the vision is broken and the magic is lost. This is when the film is reduced to the content of its parts, when it becomes its linear plot defined by the content of its anthropology, history, mythology and everything else conceivable.

Studying elements of creative practice tends to displace the image-maker as a research contributor as the following sketch indicates:

Film (History program)	=	historian	+ filmmaker
Film (Natural science)	=	scientist	+ filmmaker
Film (Wildlife documentary)	=	biologist, zoologist	+ filmmaker
Film (Ethnography)	=	anthropologist	+ filmmaker
Film (Musical productions)	=	musician	+ filmmaker
Film (Drama – fiction)	=	scriptwriter	+ filmmaker
Film (Drama – performers)	=	actor	+ filmmaker

In these circumstances the filmmaker is generally given a secondary role as someone who records the research of someone else. In the extreme case the act of filmmaking is equated, in some ways, to the act of looking at life-like situations. In this perspective the filmmaker merely adds some "smoke and mirrors" to create the magic of cinema.

This uninformed position is compounded further when the research component is a work of fiction. At present, research and fiction do not mix readily within academia and there are no signs that a reconciliation will take place any time soon – unless the difference that separates the two in creative arts is clearly understood.

Liminal Space

If a film is reduced to the content of its parts it is possible to talk clearly about some aspect of its construction. However, filmic experience is anything but clear. It arises from contradictory conflations of space, time and value. The observer is caught in the ambiguous space between the audience and the screen, between here and there, now and then, him and her, good and bad. This experience is not an oscillation between the two poles of any logical oppositions. We do not oscillate between the action on the screen and the awareness that we are in the audience. The cinematic experience spans the liminal space of two disjunctive logical terms that are simultaneously affirmed: the spectator is both here and there, him and her, good and bad. This experience defines a very specific – some would say trance-like – type of phenomenology that we are yet to understand fully. It is in here that Arnold van Gennep would locate his "tabula rasa", Turner his "ritual process", Deleuze and Guattari their "inclusive disjunctive synthesis", Lacan his Imaginary Order, Bateson and Mead their 1000 plateaus.[3] If the experience of visual engagement is ignored the defining element of screen production is lost.

It is the filmic experience with all of its trance-like phenomenology and ambiguous logic that is the defining attribute of the screen production. And it is the film experience that distinguishes the film from its content. Hence:

A film (experience) with historical events is not history on film.
A film (experience) with a journey is not geography on film.
A film (experience) with religious content is not religion on film.
A film (experience) with Indigenous content is not ethnography on film.

Similarly:

History on film need not be a filmic experience.
Geography on film need not be a filmic experience.
Religion on film need not be a filmic experience.
Ethnography on film need not be a filmic experience.

In other words, film content and film experience are not interchangeable – they should not be confused with one another.

Practice-based research - Liminal Logic

The logical structures that give rise to the experience of cinema are quite different from the linear syllogism used by conventional scholars. The filmic experience cannot be true or false in a way that a proposition can be described as true or false. The cosmology created by a good drama is most often based on ethical ambiguity rather than the ethical clearances legislated by research regulators. For the same reason the filmic text is best described by perpetual conflict rather than by the "central research question" that is fetishized by conventional scholarship.

This is why filmmakers often describe the essence of the picture they wish to make to commercial funding bodies with a "pitch", a short description that captures the essential conflict of the situation they wish to depict. What the pitch does is to describe in minimal terms the contested cultural positions that will be addressed in the production. In turn, the contested situation projects a constellation of possibilities and these possibilities in turn inform myriad of actors, settings, situations, action and significances – a whole universe of codes.

Economy of Evidence

The magic of the cinematic experience arises from a whole economy of supporting codes. The believability of the production comes into place when all codes implicated in the process support one another and are consistent with the diegetic world that has been created. This support includes the internal coherences of many diegetic life forms colliding with one another: princesses with frogs, hobbits with rings, heroes with villains. Often this complex coalescing of codes will not take place until the fine-cut stage of the post-production process is completed. We should not underestimate the delicate nature of this process. Even a small error in the content or the timing can puncture the diegetic life form created by the production. This is why the "fine-cut" is generally a most time-consuming stage of the production process, although the editing changes may be miniscule.

Impact And Catharsis

The message of an image-based text is supported not only by the economy of its constituent codes but also by emotional and ethical responses. These are not "objective" qualities but this does not mean that they are unimportant to the logic of the diegesis. The emotional qualities are frequently what we take away from a

production and cinematic emotion provides us with a signpost for future interrogation of the text. A sentimental response today may well be negated in future reflections.

Modelling

Screen productions often model some contested social situation that has currency for the audience. This is why many topical situations are often addressed in films. One could go so far as to say that if a topic has not been treated in a film it is not likely to be that important or alternatively the taboo that underpins it is too great. As a model of a social situation, it does not matter greatly if the narrative treatment is fictional or non-fictional.

Verification

As a model of some contested social situation, screen production can be considered as an empirical experiment. The verification process for such an experiment is not the same as one finds in social sciences but shares many of its features. Although the production itself may not be considered as falsifiable, it often works with falsifiable options. For example, a production will frequently commence with a most unlikable character (say a "villain") implicated in action that we may find detestable only to discover ourselves at the end of the screening sympathizing with the person in question and understanding their action (as "heroic"). The transformation of this character is often supported by another screen character who performs the inverse transformation (from hero to villain). A scheme with such parallel and complementary narratives is given in Figure 2. On the left we have the villain becoming the hero and on the right we have the hero becoming the villain. All other lines interrogate the relationship between the hero and the villain as the narrative unfolds over time:
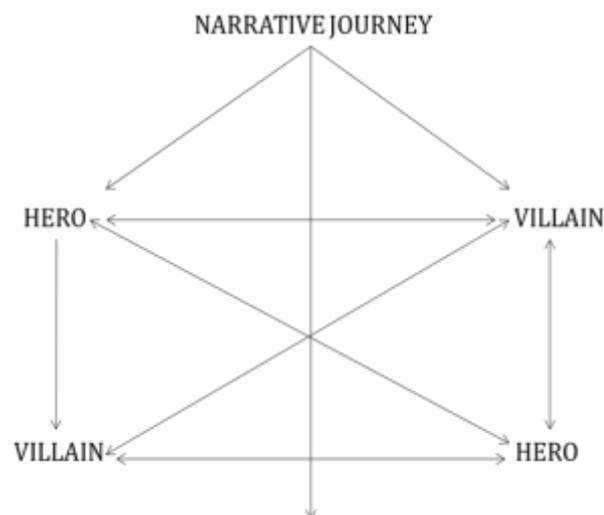
NARRATIVE JOURNEY

HERO ← → VILLAIN

VILLAIN ← → HERO

Figure 2 Schematic depiction of the logical inversions common
to many screen narratives

Self-reflexivity

Screen productions, generally, have a whole range of symmetrical and complementary characters that interrogate one another. This interrogation, in turn, brings deeper rigor to the narrative statements that are being invoked. Such an intertwined and self-reflexive diegesis may be made up of recursive logical sets and self-referencing parallel loops that resonate with one another and with other external texts.[4] It may be possible to argue that diegetic life forms of this kind come to us with a very strong verification status often summarized with the well-worn adage: "Seeing is believing".

Different Domains

For all the above reasons it may be counterproductive to look for a direct parallel between two types of scholarship: between practice-based screen production scholarship and conventional scholarship. It may be more appropriate to think of each scholarship type as having its own domain of validity. We often say to production students: "Think visually." This is another way of invoking the domain of the visual and phenomenological. Conventional scholarship does not work so well in the visual domain. No matter what we say about Mona Lisa, words will not deliver Mona Lisa. Likewise, image-based scholarship can present us with most believable texts of action but may not be all that useful when dealing with certain forms of abstract mathematics.

Necessary Complexity

We have much to gain by systematically describing the complexities that make up image-based scholarship, for only image-based scholarship can adequately describe the world dominated by images. Reverting to conventional scholarship in these circumstances would be counter-productive, as such conventional scholarship cannot account for all the features of a world in which images are ubiquitous. Hence, screen production academics should not be forced to comply with positivist research methodology from the last century as is still happening today.

Fiction/ Non-Fiction

When screen productions model some contested social situation, it does not matter greatly if the narrative model they use is fictional. This is because, among other things, fictional productions are not without material effects, in the same way that models in science are not without effect in experiments.

It could be argued that everything we know about the world is built upon some abstract model of the world. Likewise, creative works can have profound material consequences if they illuminate our existence. This is self-evident in a world that relies so much on media communication. Appearances matter. Perceptions matter. Our politicians know this all too well. They generally use media messages as a force at a distance.

It is expected that in time institutions like the ARC will come to understand the complexity of image-based texts and will no longer draw such severe distinction between fictional and non-fictional projects as they appear to do at the moment.

Emerging Forms of Screen Production Research

Cinematic experience provides the sector with the core defining characteristic of screen production research, and this experience should help the sector distinguish what is screen production research and what is not. In most cases one should look

for a film-like text with film-like experience. The film-like experience should have the liminal characteristics outlined earlier.

It is a little more difficult to define screen production research when we consider emerging forms of image-making in cyberspace. Nevertheless, cinematic experience and ambiguous cinematic logic provide good templates for emerging forms of screen production.

For example, playing with graphic menus on a computer is generally not screen production activity as such, even though editors do use these graphic menus. Research on graphic menus, in general, is not screen production research.

Cyber hyper-texts, cyber installations and interactive texts that offer screen production experience are a legitimate area of screen production research. The experience of immersion is a worthy topic for screen production research; in contrast, construction of immersive technology is not; nor is the production of new cameras, or new digital recorders. Exploring the function of cyber experience is a legitimate area of screen production research for the same reason that exploring the function of filmic experience is a legitimate area of screen production research. Responding to the expressiveness of a face is a legitimate area of screen production research in a way that programming face-recognition algorithms is not. Filmmakers are not museum curators but the museum work of Greenaway is a legitimate area of screen production research. Very often it will be necessary to consider each research project on case by case basis to decide if it is screen production research or not.

Recommendations on the Definition of the Discipline

- Screen productions often model some contested social situation that has currency for the audience. It does not matter greatly if the narrative treatment of such a model is fictional or non-fictional. Accordingly it is recommended that the sector lobby organizations such as ARC and ERA for a more flexible recognition of the screen production scholarship that includes fictional works.

- Research-on-creative-practice and creative-practice-research are different methodological disciplines. Accordingly the sector should lobby ARC and ERA for the separation of these two fields of research into two separate FoR codes.

- For the reason immediately above, it is recommended that the sector lobby ARC to ensure that screen production projects submitted to it and to ERA are assessed by screen production academics only and not by screen practice commentators.

Notes and References

1. This is evident from the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) audit for years 2010 and 2012 and specifically for ERA 1902 Film, Television and Digital Media Category:
   ERA 2010 < http://www.arc.gov.au/era/outcomes_2010/FoR/HCA1902>
   ERA 2012 http://www.arc.gov.au/era/outcomes_2012/FoR/1902, accessed March 2014.

2. Many of the issues in this section of the report are reworked from the content in Petkovic, J., Assessing Image-Based Scholarship, IM 5: 2009 Conference Proceedings: Dietetic Life Forms and Dietetic Logic

3. For further reading on liminal topics see the following: Gennep, Arnold van., *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1960, Turner, Victor Witter, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, Chicago, Aldine Pub., 1969
    Bateson G., *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1972
    Mead, M. & Bateson, G., *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, Special Publication of the New York Academy of Science, V2, 1942.
    Lacan, J., *Ecrites*, transl. Alan Sheridan, Tavisotck, 1966/ 1977.
    Deleuze G. & Guattari, F., *Thousand Plateau: Capitalism an Schizophrenia* (Vol. 2), trans. Massumi, University of Minneapolis Press, 1987.

4. This logical scheme bears some resemblance to the Aristotle's Square, although one could argue that what is being presented is much more complicated, and hypertext and writerly text are probably better terms. Useful references for additional reading on this include: Ilana Snyder, I., *Hypertext*, Melbourne University Press, 1996.
    Petkovic, J. The Rhizome and the Image, PhD thesis, Murdoch University, 1997.
    Hansen, M., Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2000.