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A Morning Coffee in Melbourne: Discussing the Contentious Spaces of Media Practice Research

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This is a conversation that took place between three practitioner-academics one morning in Melbourne. All three work and practice in the field of the moving image: from screen production to audiovisual installation to screenwriting. Our conversation is underpinned by previous research we have undertaken in this field, namely the launching of a moving image journal, *Sightlines*, and a companion journal article on the process of setting it up, which focussed on the issues presented when trying to establish peer review protocols and guidelines for moving image works.

We favour the idea of a conversation because the form allows us to be a little playful and provocative. The casual nature of this dialogue was intended to reveal the lived, embodied ways in which we deal with the issues screen production researchers are facing. We have allowed ourselves to speculate; to articulate ideas we do not necessarily hold, but know are held by others in our field. We are playing devil's advocate, attempting to untangle an argument we know it might not be possible to untangle. We use the space of dialogue (and/or fiction) to perform our ideas in ways that - we hope - also speak to the experiences and concerns of others in the field.

Rather than providing a singular voice that encompasses the huge diversity of our practices, and the different perspectives regarding the nature of creative practice research, we carry out this poly-vocal conversation (see Batty, 2016; Stroud, 2008; Williams, 2013). In it we actively look for the difficult lines of inquiry not with the intention of finding resolutions that satisfy us all; but rather with the view to maintain certain contentious spaces and encourage new ones as they emerge. This is the very strength of our field: that we can dwell in the negotiated, maintaining complexities rather than flattening them out with binaries. Might we then propose this approach as another type of discourse: an 'alternative' mode of publication that becomes key to understanding creative practice research, where the 'research' part is 'embodied', not separate to it?

This conversation also needs your input. Through your publications, we invite you to listen to the voices and speak back to them, with your own views or provocations or experiences. For us, the appropriate way to sign off on the conversation was to pose new questions that still linger for us, and which may provide impetus for further conversation (and research) within the disciplines that we work.

[IMAGES]

A LITTLE SOMETHING BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

In 2014 we organised a conference that looked more like a film festival for screen-based research works. We called it Sightlines. We put out a call, with an emphasis on screenings, but also accepted papers and panel discussions pertinent to screen-based research. We received a very enthusiastic response, with both national and international delegates keen to see what it was all about and contribute to the debates. Within the schedule we held three plenary discussions to unpack what we identified as being three key questions to the sector at the time. These were:

- 1) Do you think academic filmmaking needs written text to count as research?
- 2) What do you think the relationship should be between the screen industry and academic filmmakers?
- 3) How do you think academic filmmaking could be funded?

We continued these conversations informally to camera. These interviews were published on the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) website, where we also launched a page dedicated to the Sightlines event. The idea behind this strategy - and for the companion journal (see below) - was to make transparent the thinking, reasoning and problems being experienced within the field, especially the processes for peer reviewing screen production works. We wanted to create a space where the debates could happen publicly, where the community could gather and re-visit later (i.e., the website), and where some of the frameworks for the journal might emerge as a result of the conversations (see Glisovic

et al., 2016).

Following the event we developed a fully refereed audiovisual journal, also called Sightlines. This was based on the films (and screenplays) shown at the event, and involved a post-event process for peer review. We decided to make the peer reviews available to the public, with the opportunity for the creator/author to respond, in order to generate debate and assist people's thinking around what it means to do and assess this type of research work. The idea was to grow the journal in future years, creating a space not only for disseminating research outputs, but also for capturing ongoing debates about filmmaking in the academy. A second Sightlines event was held in 2016, and we are currently developing the second edition of the journal. Associated projects, commissioned through ASPERA, include a scoping study of the issues that practitioner-researchers are facing in the discipline, particularly in relation to the ways in which research guidelines are being interpreted variously; and a guide/principles for assessing what 'quality' might look like in screen production research, including the prestige of venues and measures of peer esteem. Both of these projects will be available via the ASPERA website in 2017.

It seemed to us the really pressing issue in terms of growing the sector was the dearth of peer reviewed publication platforms for screen-based research work. With this comes the very complicated problem of how screen-based works are evaluated and peer reviewed.

We used the Sightlines journal, issue 1, as an experimenting ground. We researched ways other people were dealing with the question of peer review. In large part we modelled our approach on the Journal for Artistic Research. Our aim was to make the very process of peer review the focus; to make all of the guidelines and processes transparent so that we could build a dialogue around these very processes and the 'problems' they bring. As can be seen from the comments section on the website, there were very few responses. This, here, is our attempt once again to develop this space, one that is still being negotiated. We do it with renewed enthusiasm, noting that since 2014 the landscape has shifted in some very positive directions. There are

more platforms for publication/dissemination, for example, and many of them are also making transparent approaches to peer review, evaluation and selection.

We did in fact contact several online journals that are publishing moving image works to probe this question further. We received some enthusiastic responses for collaboration: to create an international network of journals that are interested in and dedicated to this space.

At this point in the process, however, we would like to discuss some of the issues that have arisen for us, which for some are still contentious. This is not necessarily with the hope of resolving them; rather, to provide impetus and momentum for discussion along these lines of undecidability (perhaps).

With this background and experience, we – three Melbourne-based practitioner-researchers – held a discussion, allowing it to branch out into the more and less marginal notions. This is what we present here, with the intention of encouraging other productive arguments and viewpoints. Screen-based research is varied. It can and does do many things. While conditioned by various institutional, governmental and personal imperatives, we are interested in maintaining the complexity and diversity of practices and not dimming its vibrancy by eliminating contentious spaces. We hope others will be compelled to contribute to this debate.

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Discussion/Propositions

Craig:

Being a screenwriting practitioner-researcher, much of my work straddles the disciplines of media practice and creative writing. In developing my research career, including doing my practice-based PhD in screenwriting, I have found literature from creative writing to be not just useful, but in fact essential. This, I think, is because there is a much stronger understanding of creative practice research in that discipline, with a wealth of material available to help understand and put into practice

methodologies, methods and creative-critical experimentation. Creative writing has also been much more strident in providing opportunities for practitioner-researchers to publish creative works for/in/acknowledging the academy (see, for example, *New Writing: The international Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*; *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*). This, I think, provides a solid basis for how media practice and screen production might conceptualise what it offers.

Smiljana:

Do you think the creative writing field has done this so successfully because the mode is the same, i.e., written language? For the screen production researcher the leap between the medium they work in, and the written word, is a larger one to make?

Leo:

I agree with this, although I also think an issue for media production as research is not so much about resolving the tension between communicating through audiovisual means (instead of through written text), as it is about communicating research through a creative/imaginative/dramatic approach (as against a critical/analytical approach). In relation to this second tension, screen production has a lot in common with (and a lot that can be learned from) creative writing.

Craig:

The Australian journal *TEXT*, for example, has to date published seven special issues dedicated to creative writing as research. These include creative writing broadly, scriptwriting, and queer writing. The first of these special issues, in 2010, featured 18 works spanning poetry, prose and experimental writing. Responding to the Australian government's new rules for assessing research (Excellence in Research for Australia), which from 2009 (the trial year) included non-traditional or 'creative' works, this special issue celebrated how the new mechanisms would 'provide creative writing academics the opportunity to write in innovative ways that add new knowledge to their art form and the discipline' and 'subtly [change] the position writing academics can hold within the research framework' (Krauth et al., 2010: 3).

Smiljana:

I think it is important to keep the relationship between the policy makers and researchers an ongoing one, where experts from all disciplines are meaningfully involved in the conversations around policy. While I recognise the positive changes that ERA has made in recognising creative practice research, I also think we should be wary of always defining our research in terms of the frameworks of the day.

Leo:

To me this is a strategic issue where we have to fight on two fronts. For a filmmaker/researcher like me, there are compelling pragmatic reasons why I need my creative practice research to be recognised by my university under the existing definitions. I will not get an allocation in my workload as well as other forms of support if my research outputs are not counted. However, I also think it is important to not just accept the current research paradigms if they do not adequately reflect the way we undertake and communicate research in our discipline(s). But this also involves being able to articulate and argue for why creative practice research in screen production is different, and I think this is an ongoing process for our discipline where there is still considerable work to do.

Craig:

Going back to the creative writing example, these works are published with an accompanying short research statement in the format dictated by Excellence in Research for Australia. Scholarly interventions such as this, which make it very clear that the creative works presented are research artefacts, not only value creative practice as research, but also ensure that they are subjected to rigorous, double blind peer review, as would be expected of a 'traditional' academic publication.

Peer reviewing guidelines for *TEXT* include:

Your work will be peer reviewed, the reviewing process is double blind, neither author nor reviewers should know of the others' identities at any time during the process.

Leo:

For screen-based creative practice as research (such as film, TV and video production), peer review presents some challenges that I do not think exist for creative writing. One is defining the purpose of the peer reviews as leading to an improvement in the work prior to publication, which is the case for most text-based works. For many films this is currently seen as impractical because of the expense and logistical complexity of the process. It can also be hard to ‘blind’ the maker of the work, either because the film/video is complete with credits or simply because the existence of the creative work is well known within the field.

Craig:

Please note that refereed articles make a distinctive contribution to knowledge that extends the current scholarly literature in the field.

Smiljana:

This is interesting in terms of traditional ways of understanding ‘citation’, and ways in which one’s work directly contributes to, and extends, the field in general. How do screen works make explicit reference to their communities of practice?

Craig:

Refereed papers will draw on a sound framework of methodology and scholarship relevant to the paper’s topic, although this may include personal experience and/or anecdotal evidence where relevant to the argument, and where this is supported by scholarly literature.

Smiljana:

This is working off an already, deeply established scientific framework, which is not necessarily non-contentious. For example, the entire notion of ‘methodology’ is contested by some creative practice researchers (see, for example, Manning and Massumi, 2014). Is there room to completely re-think/re-invent the very foundations of how we produce ‘new knowledge’, which may have nothing to do with a ‘sound

methodology'? Perhaps it is a matter of having a more flexible definition of methodology; perhaps it is a matter of using another term that does not bring with it a series of assumptions that are not helpful to the researcher-practitioner.

Leo:

I do not have a problem with the definition of research involving the discovery of 'new knowledge', but I think for many forms of media practice the definition of knowledge should be broadened, to include areas such as affect as a form of sensory knowing (see Berkeley et al., 2016).

Craig:

Creative work will be accepted for refereeing if it makes a distinctive contribution to knowledge that extends the current scholarly literature in the field and is accompanied by a 250-word exegetical statement for publication that makes this case. The statement will indicate the research significance of the creative piece and will follow the ERA guidelines on this element (Krauth et al., 2010: 5).

Smiljana:

ERA has other guidelines, too, such as the importance of where the work was exhibited. Here, there is a very different kind of standard than the one for traditional outputs. For example, if the work was shown (not as a research artefact but as a commercial product) at a cinema, or film festival, it usually has a high standing. This I think is problematic. Perhaps it is relevant in terms of 'engagement and impact', but what kind of engagement (that leads to) impact is it having? Commercial success seems to creep in as a more important marker than perhaps the research intentions and contributions. It is for reasons such as this that I feel we should approach these governmental frameworks critically.

Leo:

Film festival selection is an indicator of quality, but not of research quality. Using it as a proxy indicator in this way has never made any sense to me. This is why I would argue there should be specific festivals (such as Sightlines) and forms of publication

that focus on creative media productions made as research. Peer review should primarily address the significance of the works as research. Of course, identifying in what ways the creative work is ‘doing’ research is the big question that is being discussed elsewhere in this conversation.

Craig:

Though contentious for some, the notion that a research statement is required to accompany the creative work is important to me. Discussing the background, contribution and significance of the research, not only does this communication of research give context to the creative work as an outcome of research, it also – *crucially* – ensures that the work can be understood by those outside of the discipline or those with limited knowledge of the form or genre. In this way, research is made explicit and transparent rather than veiled and open to questioning. In my view, and from my experience of working as a research leader in the creative practice space, leaving the research endeavour open to interpretation can be dangerous, if not damaging.

Smiljana:

I agree. But I do not think one can do this in 250-300 words, as per the statements we provide for ERA (or the REF). The nature of these statements seems very cursory to me. I think a much more structured, rigorous kind of ‘exposition’ needs to take place. An argument needs to be made and evidenced. An argument cannot be made in 250-300 words. Yes, this implies that screen production researchers, for example, must also be writers. They also need to be versed in the language of the academy. When we do research it needs to be communicable. It was evident from our Sightlines journal experiment that many of the reviewers, who were all peers of the authors of the submissions, needed some parameters around how and what to review. The peers themselves needed the ‘research’ dimension of the submission to be articulated to them because much of the time it is not simply there, explicitly in the film. It is important that the research is communicable because it can then be taken up by others. This is one way a discipline grows.

Leo:

I think it is possible for a film to do research and communicate research without the need for written text to accompany it, particularly if it is a documentary or essay film. However, I also accept that in many cases the nature of the research is not clearly evident in a screen-based creative work, even through an informed viewing of the work. This particularly applies in relation to research on the media production process, which is a particular interest of mine. It is hard to see why there needs to be a restrictive form required for a research statement. I would prefer this to be open to the practitioner/researcher, with an encouragement to use written text, audiovisual means or any other method to focus attention on the research.

Craig:

If we turn to Ross Gibson's (2010) idea of 'knowing' (i.e., what does a work know; how, on the basis of research, is the work created so that it does 'know' something?), what happens if that which the work knows is open to interpretation? If, for example, in a PhD examination the assessor feels (i.e., knows) something about the creative work that is *different* to what was intended (i.e., the research pursuit), how is the work assessed: as a failure, or as a triumph? Brabazon and Daggi's (2010) argument that creative practice in the academy should always be called research, not art, is interesting (if not contentious) here; and I have to admit that for me, a clear communication of research (i.e., a research statement) that accompanies a creative work is essential in an academic context.

Smiljana:

I think the scenario you posit is a fine one. If the peer reviewer sees something other than what the researcher intended, this is cause to extend the conversation, to extend the research and its contribution. But how could this be called a failure? Rather, a dialogue between these researchers and the broader community should be taken up. To focus too much on 'assessment' is limiting. Might we not think about what potentialities have been opened up by a particular contribution?

Leo:

I have argued elsewhere for a broader definition of knowledge in relation to creative media practice works, but the other factor relevant to evaluation in this area is for the research to produce *new* knowledge (or make a *contribution* to knowledge). This is why peer review is important and why not all creative practice undertaken in the academy can be understood as research. A lot of it is interesting and worthwhile for other reasons, but it is not making a contribution to knowledge in the field.

Craig:

To end on a reflection of examining scripted works in the academy, for PhDs and for general research, where authors either chose not to or simply forgot to provide a research statement with their creative outputs, the task of appraising them as creative practice *research* was extremely difficult – if not impossible. It was unclear what the intention of the scripts were, and so instead of spending my time valuing how the works were informed by and embodied research, the default was to respond to generic issues around content and craft. This was probably inappropriate at best, but given the lack of background (to the research) not much else was possible. Here, then, I found myself working as an industry-style script reader rather than a screenwriting academic.

Smiljana:

Yes I can see how this would be the case. This is because a creative practice research artefact is not necessarily a container where the ‘knowledge’ lies. Creative practice research happens at many levels of a much larger research process and intention. Perhaps there is no knowledge in the film itself, for example. In which case the film itself is perhaps not the ‘output’, but rather other collateral (usually written papers) are needed, in conjunction with the work, to expose the research. At this particular point I think the written word is important. For my specific practice the relationship between the moving image work and any writing I do about it has to be negotiated with each new project. For me this very relationship can lead to further findings, further research questions: to deepen and extend the research in general. So for me it is not just about writing, it is about the KIND of writing in relation to the KIND of moving image practice particular to that work, which is important to interrogate each

time.

Leo:

How might we summarise these discussions? What questions are we left with? What do we all want to explore further?

Craig:

If we consider writing as a process of 'thought in action' (i.e., ideas transcribed through language), what is the problem with screen and media practitioners having to produce a statement of research? Is writing the problem; or is the problem actually there being a lack of research?

Leo:

In filmmaking as research, does it matter if the film that emerges from the research is unsuccessful?

Smiljana:

Are the artistic and scholarly spirits fundamentally at odds? Is artistic practice at odds with academic notions of research? Or is there a wonderful, entirely other kind of beast, that is the artist-researcher?

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