

The Creative Researcher in Search of Outputs

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Practice led research as a term is taken up by academic artists and creative practitioners to describe a form of research that, whilst it is somehow different to the research that we find in the sciences, social science and humanities, is no less legitimate. Art practice creates statements in the form of works of art. Science practice creates statements in the form of conclusions drawn from data obtained during the research process. This sounds like a good match until we ask what makes a good science statement and what makes a good art statement? For science we have a small number of significant criteria. Top of the list is falsifiability, is it possible to refute the statement. In art it is not so easy. I can't for example demonstrate that a work of art as a statement is wrong.

This paper is about research, and comes out of the early stages of a project in which the researchers have made an observation in relation to theory, developed a proposition, and now plan to test that proposition and answer some questions by making a narrative film. Not the least of these questions is what are the research outputs of this creative project?

In what follows I will be looking at film making in terms of Biggs' (Biggs, 2002) reclassification of Christopher Freyling's three ideas of creative practice. In particular the difficult third class, 'research for art' that Biggs renames 'work of art'. Whilst the film itself may be a work of art, film making is a process. In many ways this process is similar to experimentation and the finished film is the result of the experiment, in which case can we view the film as the results, or data, arising from the process or experiment? For this to be possible we would have to be making the film with the purpose of testing a proposition.

The paper starts with a story. The story is very short but it raises some questions about creative research and gaps in knowledge.

The Story

A Colleague came into my office and said, "I want to make a film. I teach film making but I haven't made a film for ages, so I think I should make one. You should help me."

Making films is hard work. Apart from being physically exhausting, (on account of all the getting up early in the morning and rushing around organising things and people, lifting heavy objects, and coping with frustration, so that ultimately you make a film that, after all the compromises, is an approximation of what you were planning), film making has the potential to be mentally exhausting. So saying, "Yes I will help you make a film," was not the first thing that sprung to mind.

It is not as if I don't have a job already. I work as an academic teaching film production in an under graduate Media Arts and Production degree and am a PhD. candidate scrambling to become doctoral before 2013. I do have enough to do.

I was about to say,...

"I would love to help, but won't be able, what with one thing and another, to contribute very much at all, but do let me know how you get on."

when it occurred to me that

Recommendation 22 of the Bradley Review of Higher Education suggests that universities should research in the same areas in which they offer course work degrees.(Bradley, 2008)

This is almost the end of the story so I will cut it short so I can get to the exciting parts of this paper...

" OK " I said, "When do you want to start?..."

Since academics are asked to produce research in their teaching areas, doing research in areas beyond our faculty FoR codes is not encouraged, nor does it receive institutional support. This means that research in how to teach film studies or film production, or any pedagogy in general, might be encouraged in a Faculty of Education but is not encouraged in my faculty, which is a Faculty of Arts and Design. This position arises from decisions made outside of academia by governments looking to maximise the research dollar. Add to this new mappings of the tertiary

education landscape, that show Universities as places that offer research-based teaching as opposed to practice-based teaching, and it becomes increasingly important to be able to demonstrate research in our teaching area.

Creative research is presented as a research model that allows creative practitioners, teaching in universities, the possibility of claiming their creative outputs as research. Practice led / creative research puts the emphasis on the production of creative work as a research activity. We talk of practice led research as opposed to research, and point to the work of art as a research output. This means that by saying yes to helping make the film I was committing to a practice led / creative research process, in which I was a co-researcher, that would result in the production of a creative work which by definition was a research output.

Defining a film as research does two things. Firstly it allows me to tick some of the boxes, not all of them – a film after all is not a book – during my Professional Development Review saying that yes, I have been research active. Secondly, because research has traditionally been aligned with creating new knowledge, it forces me to ask, “What will I know after making the film that I don’t know now?” Putting the practice before the research suggests that this question is not the *sine qua non* of the activity and that I should not worry so much about outcomes. I might even answer it by gently pointing out that knowledge may come in many forms and sometimes practice led / creative research might result in new understandings as opposed to new knowledge. I can go further and claim that statements of knowledge can take a variety of forms, not all of them based in language and not all of them effable to non experts. This position whilst reassuring – I will after all be able to tick those boxes – does not really answer my question, which is about knowing and pre visualising that knowing in terms of recognising what I don’t know now.

That these questions arise at all is due to the massive technological and logistical hurdles that film making as a creative practice presents. I said right at the start that film making was difficult. Part of that difficulty comes from the fact that you cannot make a narrative scripted live action film on your own. The idea that you must gather people and resources together to turn the director’s vision into a screen-able film means that the creativity must happen before the film making. So if the creativity, that is, the pre visualisation of a film happens before the practical making of the film, how can it be said to be practice led research? And further, if we have already visualised the finished film and communicated that vision to our film making collaborators we should be able to answer my original question, “What will I know after making the film that I don’t know now?” quite easily. We should if we are to make the film ‘properly’ be able to answer, “Nothing”. In which case why make the film, why not just prepare to make the film?

We can argue that the best laid plans of mice and men not only go astray but often result in happy accidents and unforeseen outcomes, that is we learn things that we had not even thought of not knowing, or what we thought we knew turned out to be inappropriate knowledge. We can back this up anecdotally, citing artists at the peak of their careers taking advantage of accidents and compromises that happen during production. Kubrick's film 2001 a *Space Odyssey* (1968) provides an example of a happy accident in the choice of music for the space ship waltz sequence that, for me, is the best part of the film after the ape make up. The producers had always intended to commission a score for this sequence but, during the picture editing process, the editing team had chosen Richard Strauss' *Blue Danube* for the space ship docking sequence so as to have something to cut to (Cumbow, 2011).

The happy accident idea seems to provide an answer to my original question. After making the film I will know something that I don't know now, and that if I know what that something is before I make the film then the something that I learn will be something else¹. To put that another way, I don't know what I will learn but I will know when I see it. I do not believe that this will go well on an ARC grant application.

So far I have taken the example of film making as a creative practice and, using the rationale of practice led / creative research, made a poor case as to why it should be a research activity. By extension I would like to include all creative practice in this dilemma. Not because I believe that creative practice is incapable of producing research, rather I am interested in the sort of outputs that creative practice can produce and what role the actual practice part can be expected to take. By testing these ideas I hope to make them more robust. In the second part of this paper I will use an example of a happy accident in traditional research to reposition theory as the starting point for practice led research, as I do so I will be using Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge as it pertains to pursuing a scientific hunch. In so doing my plan is to remove the happy accident as a research goal from practice led / creative research and replace it with something more repeatable.

As preparation for this task I will revisit Karl Popper's dilemma that leads to his statement about statements. Karl Popper's description of a scientific statement puts falsifiability as the number one criterion. This means that in order for a statement to be considered as scientific it must be possible to imagine a situation that would prove the statement wrong. It is this criterion that separates scientific statements from all other statements (Popper, 1963). Popper started his

¹ If x = knowledge gained and y = knowledge about x , then x comes from the set $((n+1)-y)$

work on epistemology as a response to the idea that it is possible to follow an empirical method of enquiry based on observations that, whilst it appears scientific, in reality is something else. Astrology is based on observations of horoscopes and biographies but the statements are not generally considered scientific.

Popper's question does not come from a dissatisfaction with astrology. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in a climate defined by revolution and change, four theories became very popular amongst Popper's colleagues. As he puts in an address in 1963,

After the collapse of the Austrian empire there had been a revolution in Austria: the air was full of revolutionary slogans and ideas, and new and often wild theories. Among the theories which interested me Einstein's theory of relativity was no doubt by far the most important. The three others were Marx's theory of history, Freud's psycho-analysis, and Alfred Adler's so-called "individual psychology." (Popper, 1963)

What Popper noticed was that Einstein's theory could be tested against observations that had the possibility of disproving the theory, whereas the other three theories explained everything in terms of the theory. In the case of Freud and Adler there was no possible situation that could not be explained using both systems simultaneously and independently. Popper saw that these, as it were non science theories, have a complete internal logic that, when applied to an observation, always confirm the theory. The results of any prediction the theory might make about future events will always be observed in light of that theory, and interpreted by that theory, and its internal logic, as confirmation that the theory is a good one. There are two things to note. Firstly this is a characteristic shared by other knowledge systems such as astrology and religion. Secondly truth does not come into it, since in order for truth to be important there must be the possibility of untruth.

The possibility of untruth needs further explanation. In discussing the truth claims of photography, Tom Gunning (2004) considers the perfect lie detector, guaranteed to detect every lie in any situation. The secret of this marvellous machine is that it classes each and every statement as a lie. As a lie detector it is perfect but as a way of separating true statements from false it is unsatisfactory. The sort of statements that Popper identified in the theories of Freud, Marx and Adler may very well be true, but since it is impossible to separate the true from the false we are stuck not knowing if we know or don't know.

I would like to think that if we are doing practice led / creative research that it has relevance outside our own creative practice. That is that there is more than internal logic at play and that

that relevance is more than just contextual. By which I mean the creative statements are adding to the quality not just the quantity of creative statements available in our field. In the creative process that a film represents, if we are to be able to advance knowledge we cannot just make another film and hope that something will turn up. Putting the practice first isn't going to guarantee a research output beyond the production of a short film. It is only if we put the theory first that we can justify the time, effort and expense involved in film production. Putting theory first does not necessarily mean that there is no room for happy accidents within creative practice, nor does it mean that the film itself becomes redundant, but it does mean that we should start the film making with a question based in theory.

Happy accidents happen in science laboratories as well as artist's studios. Alexander Fleming owes his Nobel Prize to an accident that, had he been less messy, would never have happened. Whilst investigating the properties of staphylococci bacteria, a culture was accidentally contaminated with mould. Fleming noticed that an area around the mould was bacteria free. If the contamination was an accident Fleming's interpretation of the results was not. Fleming was well placed to interpret what he saw on the contaminated plate since his earlier work on the effects of antiseptic on bacteria and wounds had found that antiseptics only killed surface bacteria whilst at the same time removing other beneficial agents in the patient's immune system, thereby allowing bacteria not affected by the antiseptic to flourish and kill the patient. Furthermore he had already discovered antibacterial properties associated with lysozyme in human snot and egg white. He was, as it were, primed to notice opportunities presented by the unexpected die back of bacteria colonies.

After some work Fleming was able to isolate the bacteria-killing agent in the mould, which after trying the name "mould juice", he eventually called penicillin. This boy's own story of scientific success is also an example of practice led research success. The practice was categorising the attributes of staphylococcus. Making observations is what science does and what it observes is controlled by theory. In this example the observations were adding to knowledge about pathogens and bacteria. In terms of practice led / creative research the work on staphylococcus would be recognised as leading to new understandings of staphylococcus. It was not a set of random observations, and neither was it a random deduction. Michael Polanyi (1962) accounts for this serendipitous coming together of scientist and scientific opportunity through the idea of tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is the knowledge that we don't know that we know, or the knowledge that we use with out thinking about it. We tie our shoelaces and ride bicycles using tacit knowledge. When Fleming saw the contaminated culture, instead of throwing it away and tidying up his lab or

coming to an alternative hypothesis about the relationship between mould and bacteria, for example that the moment of contamination or other outside agencies had killed the bacteria, he used tacit knowledge to suggest that the mould itself was producing the anti bacterial agent. If we look on this event as an example of tacit knowledge then it is not so much a happy accident as a discovery waiting to happen.

Happy accidents happen when what we don't know intersects with what we didn't know we knew, or were not interested in at the time. Practice is good for allowing this to happen but you cannot plan for it. Instead we can engage in practice as an opportunity to engage with theory. This paper comes out of a need to justify the production of a creative work in terms of research outputs and to answer the questions that arise at the beginning of a creative collaboration. Film making more than other creative endeavours forces the question, "What are we doing and why are we doing it that way?"

To Go Back To The Story....

" OK " I said, "When do you want to start? What are we going to do and why?"

It is the, 'and why' part of that question that is important since it is the 'and why' that is asking for the research question. In response to the 'and why' we have developed a question that looks at screen grammar.

In film making there is a rule that is used to control the spatial relationships between characters on the screen that are shot out of sequence so that when the sequence is put together during editing, the characters maintain screen direction and their relative positions between wide shots and close ups. It is important and forms the background to any discussion of screen continuity. We teach it as the 180 Degree Rule, which is unfortunate since observation of modern film and television suggests that it is not only not a rule, but neither is it much of a guide line. We find the rule broken repeatedly not just by hip young film makers whose audience has had their brains turned to mush by You Tube and MTV, but by film makers and editors who have received the adulation of their peers in the form of major awards.

From observing this rule being broken we have developed an hypothesis that screen language has evolved to include the idea of emotional space and that breaking the 180 Degree Rule can invoke this emotional space through interruption to the screen direction / continuity convention.

This proposition positions screen language as a language that evolves and does not replace the 180 Degree Rule.

Having developed a hypothesis we will carefully make a film that allows us to test that hypothesis. The film will be a creative output. It will also be an experiment that will provide data for analysis. That data can be presented as research and conclusions can be reached. The data may or may not support the hypothesis. It may suggest that we are misguided and we will have to find something else to account for the observation. We don't have to make a film to test this proposition. We could make observations in already existing films. Making a film does however allow for a controlled environment in that we know the film makers intentions before we make the film. Making the film is akin to observations in the field being tested in the laboratory.

So I can say that the research outputs of this creative project will be a film, and a series of papers that position the film as an experiment that provides data, and present conclusions based on that data. We also intend to track this project as a creative research project with the goal of refining the concept of practice led / creative research through the practice of research in screen production.

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