

ASSESSING GRADUATE SCREEN PRODUCTION OUTPUTS IN NINETEEN AUSTRALIAN FILM SCHOOLS: RATIONALE FOR THE 2008 ASPERA-CARRICK PROJECT APPLICATION

Josko Petkovic

Screen production programmes are commonplace in Australian Universities. They are a major component of what is broadly known as the Creative Arts sector within Australian Universities. This sector has grown rapidly in the last 30 years and now constitutes around 6 per cent of the total student population. Yet, such rapid growth has not been accompanied by an 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. Producing image-based texts does not fit neatly into the conventional paradigms of scholarship. Indeed, for many years image-making was viewed as the outcome of an artistic activity which was generally considered to be subjective and thus difficult to measure and evaluate. The assessment status of an image-based text is further complicated by the group nature of screen production. A functioning crew may consist of many “authors” working together at a different level of performance (e.g. undergraduate, postgraduate, professionals, performers) and often under the supervision and overriding guidance of an academic staff member. How can these different contributions be defined, measured, evaluated, moderated and reported? This is the overriding question that underpins the 2008 ASPERA-Carrick Project.

While there is considerable flexibility in assessing specific mechanical and technical skills, the problem of assessment becomes more complicated when assessing the value of the creative work as a whole. At this level, all the processes that give rise to the image-based text come under scrutiny. Further, the differences between the visual mode of “writing” and conventional academic writing become unavoidable and problematic. Such problems of assessing at this level bring into question existing academic regulations, notions of authorship, validation procedures, concepts of originality, and even the very notion of academic practice.

Graduate Exhibitions and Publications: It should be noted that the problem of assessing screen production is too great for the former Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). Each year DEEWR collects publications data from staff in all tertiary institutions and rewards them with funds according to their publication output. At present, DEEWR does not collect creative works as publications data because they do not know how to evaluate their worth. As a result, the Creative Arts sector does not formally exist and no publications funds come to the institutions that give rise to these works or to the 6 or so per cent of the academic population they represent. The inability of DEEWR to evaluate creative works is a problem that is normally of concern to staff and researchers only. However this problem is not without consequences for the creative arts students for whom exhibition of work is generally the *raison d'être* of their work. Exhibiting one's work to an audience is a common practice for screen producers at all levels of development. The exhibitions range from festivals of short films – as short as 30 seconds' ads – to feature films and documentaries. A screen productions assessment

process should account for this important attribute.

The inability of DEEWR to evaluate creative works is most unfortunate as screen production academics do not have difficulties assessing the work of their students or their colleagues at every level of performance. They have successfully carried out such assessment for many years, even when this assessment has included handing out awards. Generally the assessment of screen productions consists of a tri-component process:

- (i) Overall evaluation of creative work contextualized by its genre (e.g. ethnography, drama, comedy, animation, documentary). This overall evaluation may include the publication worth of the creative work and relevant award-rankings (e.g. Best Film, Best Drama, Best Animation).
- (ii) Evaluation of a specific crew function (e.g. camera, editing). This specific evaluation may include the publication worth of the specific creative function and relevant award-rankings (e.g. Best Direction, Best Editing).
- (iii) Evaluation of the gestalt part-whole relationship (i.e. contribution of a specific crew function to the overall project).

This assessment process is highly sensitive and attuned to the exhibition potential of the work. The exhibiting of the work, in turn, provides an external moderation to the assessment process. Most festivals select from the international pool of works, which gives further rigour to this external moderation process. The festival selection is also an indication of originality and quality as festivals, generally, seek productions that are fresh and different from others in either form or content. Some festivals give out awards for excellence. Additional moderation of quality comes from broadcast stations which screen the most audience-friendly productions. Yet another level of moderation comes from pre-sale and commissioned works. Many of these publication attributes are invoked by the *Australian Screen Production Research Index* (ASPRI) publication index developed by ASPERA for evaluation of publications. (Marvell, 2005; Petkovic, 2005c)

If, by all accounts, the screen production assessment process works well and graduate creative works are accepted as publications by national and international festivals, why then is this achievement not accounted for or accepted by academic regulators such as DEEWR? For most image-makers there are no valid reasons for DEEWR's position nor do they see valid reasons for distinguishing between conventional texts and image-based texts. Accordingly, it could thus be said that the primary aim of this project is to bridge the gap in assessing screen productions in tertiary institutions that presently exists between regulators such as DEEWR and screen production academics.

The Need for Evidence: While we believe that there is every reason to accept image-makers at their word and accept that the existing assessment processes work well, there is no published research to indicate that this evaluation is consistent. In the absence of such research it is easy to maintain the controversial proposition that image-making and

exhibition is art-related and not scholarship-related and that, in any case, it is difficult to work out who has contributed to the authorship and intellectual content of the productions, given that normally it takes many people to complete a production.

The aim of ASPERA-CARRICK Grant Project is to dispel such objections by accumulating a body of evidence that will demonstrate, in quantitative and qualitative terms, that evaluation of creative works is as consistent as evaluation of conventional academic outcomes.

Approach: What does it mean to write with images? How reflective and scholarly can this process be when it is locked in to a relentless unfolding of a film or television programme? What kind of scholarship does this process entail when it cannot make use of footnotes, bibliographies and references? What kind of logic is at play when images are not subject to truth and falsity as are sentences and arguments? A single image may well contain thousands of “words”, but how do we know which of these “words” will be read? How do we evaluate this process and arrange regulations to moderate this evaluation process? How do we do this when often the primary aim of the work is not a single critical reader but a large audience? As troublesome as these questions may seem at the outset of any evaluation process, what cannot be doubted is that image-based communication works well and that image-based texts can communicate in a most powerful way.

One expects that, in time, image-based scholarship will have its own well-defined operational prescriptions, regulations and methodologies, as is the case with its written counterpart. But these are not in place as yet. During the transition period, it is likely that the validity of the emerging image-based scholarship will continue to be judged by a comparison with the conventional paradigms of scholarship (Petkovic, 2005b). In this comparison the problems raised by assessing image-based productions bring into question:

- (i) the nature of the image-based academic work: Is this scholarship or is it art?
- (ii) existing regulations that foreground conventional paradigms of scholarship
- (iii) the notions of authorship other than written authorship
- (iv) the polysemic and multi-dimensional nature of the image-based text
- (v) validation and verification procedures – can image-based text be consistently evaluated?
- (vi) what to do with the exhibition element of screen production work.

Our ASPERA team has considered the above issues over many years and many discussions. During this time we have developed a range of strategies that will guide our approach to the problems raised above. The summary of these deliberations is described below:

Art or Scholarship?: The relationship between art and academia has been a turbulent one. In antiquity, art and scholarship were considered as different forms of what was essentially the same intellectual activity. Some 400 years ago a split developed as a result

of which art become associated with something that is altogether subjective, amorphous, unverifiable and often anchored in an impulse. Scholarship, on the other hand, became defined as objective, empirical and scientific, subject to measurement and verification, additive, progressive and above all grounded in axiomatic, syllogistic and positivist reason. The publication of *Principia Mathematica* by Russell and Whitehead in 1910 marks the high point of this division between art and scholarship. *Principia Mathematica* is the most elegant expression of the positivist ideology in which everything to do with reason and language could be reduced to the purity of mathematics and logic. Until quite recently tertiary institutions were the bastions of this positivist dream. Creative Arts did not seem to fit readily into this picture and were moved out of universities by both curriculum and academic regulations. To a large extent this art–scholarship distinction still holds sway today.

In 1931 Gödel brought to an end the positivist claims to theoretical certainty with the publication of his Theorem of Formally Undecidable Propositions. In essence Gödel (1931) showed that positivist theoretical certainty was akin to pulling oneself up by one's bootlaces. In the same year Heisenberg said something similar with his Uncertainty Principle for experiments in physics. While Gödel's Theorem of Formally Undecidable Propositions and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle were widely accepted, the positivist methodology and the art–scholarship divide continued as if nothing much happened.

Funding institutions that arose from this art–scholarship divide likewise enshrined this divide in their operations. In Australia this is exemplified by the two premier funding institutions: the Australian Arts Council and the Australian Research Council. The Arts Council stipulates that they will not fund anything “educational”, while the Australian Research Council regulations stipulate that they will not fund anything “artistic” (ARC, 2008):

ARC Discovery Projects does **NOT** support the following work:

6.5.1b. activities leading solely to the creation or performance of a work of art, including visual art, musical compositions, drama, dance, designs and literary works, for which Commonwealth Government support is provided through the Australia Council for the Arts.

Art–Scholarship Resolution: Our application is based on the proposition that this division of art and scholarship is, broadly, based on error and that the most interesting, innovative and creative developments in the world today are now taking place on the boundary of this art–scholarship divide. In this context the aim of our project is to dissolve the divide that presently exists between conventional academia and creative arts by simply demonstrating that assessment of the so called art-based practices – such as screen production – is essentially the same as assessment of conventional scholarship. In short, to demonstrate that the art–scholarship divide is artificial and that in academic and assessment terms it represents a non-problem.

We are confident that the art–scholarship divide will give way not because of some abstract philosophical aspiration or inclination, but because of the available evidence. This evidence first came into view some 50 years ago when television emerged as a

primary medium of communication. With television dominating the daily existence of many, it was only a matter of time before the study of media found its way in to the university curriculum. This in turn led to an explosion of communication- and media-related courses and programmes in the late 70s and 80s. With the growth of these theoretical courses there was a corresponding growth in the number of film schools. In Australia this growth began in 1966 with the Film and TV School in Swinburne Institute of Technology, followed by the emergence of the Australian Film Television and Radio School in 1972. In successive decades, numerous other film schools were founded at other universities. Today, the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) – the peak body of all Australian film schools – is constituted by 19 film schools.

Given the trajectory of this development one can ask the obvious question: Are these new forms of creative arts scholarship a fertile way of dealing with problems of the contemporary world? Our answer is yes – they are. These new and emerging forms of scholarship are indicative of a world that is ever more dependent on images, new media and the Internet and a world that cannot be addressed solely by conventional scholarship methods.

Existing Regulations: We note that it was only in 2001, some 100 years after the invention of film, that screen production was accepted as a creative art research category by the ARC. In the same year DEST began collecting publications data on creative works, only to give it up a year afterwards because they found the verification process to be beyond them. We are now in a situation in which creative works such as screen production are recognized but not accounted for in any way. For obvious reasons this situation cannot be allowed to continue. Accordingly, we consider that there is an urgent need to reshape our academic standards and assessment reporting practices, from the ground-level up, so that these are inclusive of new and emerging forms of teaching and learning. Our project aims to contribute to this change.

Honours Dissertation: One way that conventional academia has attempted to deal with the art–scholarship divide is to divide the creative arts output into two components consisting of the creative work itself and an exegesis which narrates upon the creative work from a conventional scholarship perspective. At present, Honours dissertations in Screen Production generally consist of a production component and a written component, as is the case with research thesis in Creative Arts. The relationship that exists between these two components is highly ambiguous, as is the assessment grade awarded to the student. Invariably, the exegesis is foregrounded in this doublet (Krauth, 2002; Barrett, 2004). The relationship between the creative work and its exegesis is becoming a controversial issue in creative arts research, no doubt for the same reasons that the art–scholarship divide is coming under question (Fletcher et al, 2004; Brady, 2004; Perry, 2004).

The Test Sample: This project rests on the hypothesis that the creative work itself can be evaluated consistently by a group of peers. This is not to undercut the value of the written component or underestimate its worth. Rather it is simply to endorse the autonomous

worth of the practical component. The logical extension of this position is that only the production work will be used to evaluate the test sample in the first instance. Subsequently, the report on both the written *and* practical components of the Honours thesis will be used to augment the numerical analysis with a qualitative interpretation.

Authorship: One problem with creative work has to do with authorship. A conventional publication has a very specific author or authors. In contrast, films and videos are generally produced by a group who often work in different media. Here is a list of some of the major contenders for an image-based “authorship”: Executive Producer, Producer, Associate Producer, Originator of the research concept, Primary Researcher, Primary Writer, Originator of the film concept, Film Researcher, Scriptwriter, Script Editor, Script Consultant Director, Locations Manager, Production Manager, Casting Director, Director of Photography Cinematographer, Art Direction, Special Effects Designer, Software/Hardware Designer, Sound effects Composer, Music Composer, Performer, Narrator, Editor, Sound Editor. And this is merely a few of the many who contribute to authorship!

During the 2005 ASPERA Conference it was agreed that, when applicable, seven authors would be considered when assessing screen production work in the first instance. These are: Primary Researcher, Scriptwriter, Creative Producer, Director, Camera, Editor, CGE Designer, Executive Producer (Petkovic, 2005c; Marvell, 2005).

The Nature of the Image Narrative – Multidimensional Logic: Although image-based texts generally do not include references and footnotes, the multiplicity of meaning intrinsic to each image gives it great potential for internal referencing. Various elements of each filmic scene – such as sound, image, foreground, mid-ground, background, colour, movement, voiceover, music – are able to reference one another, and usually do so in good films. Such internal referencing invariably increases the signifying content of the image in a way that may not be obvious to an untrained eye. Elsewhere we have argued that this internal and indirect system of referencing is the crucial and defining element of the image-based text which multiplies the meaning of the image. It is also a most powerful multidimensional system of communication which, if harnessed properly, is able to communicate parallel and simultaneous messages in a way that words can only imitate (Deleuze, 2003). Communicating with such a multidimensional logical system intrinsically requires a more complex intellectual undertaking than that based on a simple word-based syllogism – if only because words are frequently only one element of an image-based text.

What is evident about this internal kind of referential system is that it cannot be simply added to the text like a footnote in a piece of writing. Rather, it must be constructed from the very body of the text. Constructing such an internal referencing system is thus inseparable from constructing the text as such. It involves the very materiality of the text with all its formal characteristics. Furthermore, one must ensure that the reference at any one particular place is consistent with all other textual elements, all other connotations and with the text as a whole. Such referential work consists of getting various multi-dimensional elements of the text to work together as a constructed totality, almost as if the construction of the text entailed an engineering task. This is a multi-dimensional

problem in which the signifying of the “totality” of connections is always greater than the sum of the parts.

Something similar can be said of the multiple “authors” that constitute the filmic crew. They too represent a multidimensional referential system. Getting all the above-mentioned “authors” to collaborate on a production is the real work of many screen producers. This is a “constructivist” task in which each “constructed” part is completed by accounting for the multidimensional relationship between the part and the gestalt whole that the work represents (Sonnenburg, 2004). It is exactly this work of putting things together which is invisible and which is not understood by many conventional academics, who see only the “art” of the finished product (Petkovic, 2005b).

Assessing Image-based Complexity: It would generally be very difficult to quantify the full extent of all the multi-dimensional referential systems at work in an image-based text, because it is essentially open-ended. It certainly would not be like counting the number of footnotes. Such an assessment can best be done subjectively by a competent person. For example, film editors understand the multidimensional logic by which images are constructed and can describe such gestalt judgment through various “montage” rules. So too do film directors and cinematographers who compose and record performances in the first instance. Likewise, all other members of the production crew understand this logic in their own specific way. Implicit in this understanding is that most elements of this complexity can be measured and assessed by competent image-makers.

Peer Assessment of Screen Production: Under these circumstances, the only appropriate prescription one can give when it comes to assessing such work is that this assessment should be carried out and contextualized by a panel of peers and experts. This is the primary reason why the 2005 National ASPERA Conference established State and National Peer Review Committees to evaluate and referee screen production works. This position on assessment and evaluation is in every way consistent with the published findings of DEST’s own commissioned project entitled “Measures of quality and impact of publicly funded research in the humanities, arts and social sciences”, which was carried out by the Council of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) (Powell, 2005). While CHASS’s findings were directed towards research, given the centrality of research to teaching and learning, there is every reason to think that these findings are valid for academic output in general.

ASPRA Peer Review Committees: It was in view of the above sentiments that ASPERA decided to create a network of Peer Review Committees to assess works produced by its member institutions (Petkovic, 2005c, 2007). In a summary form, these Committees are defined and designed to operate as follows: ASPERA’s National Peer Review Committee is made up of 19 ASPERA representatives from all its 19 member institutions. The five ASPERA State Peer Review Committees consist of respective ASPERA state delegates. These State Peer Review Committees will evaluate creative works submitted to them by state tertiary institutions. They will also evaluate the publication worth of each production submitted to them by state tertiary institutions. This will be done using the APRI publication index devised by ASPERA for this purpose

(Petkovic, 2005c, 2007b). The national Peer Review Committee will moderate the work of state branches to ensure that evaluation is consistent throughout Australia. If applicable, ASPERA's National Peer Review committee will advise DEEWR and other relevant authorities on the publication value of screen-based works submitted to it.

Dissemination of Information: Educating and negotiating with our regulators, politicians, institutions and academia in general is a critical element of this project. This process is already underway and will be greatly enhanced by this project (Phillips et al., 2005; Petkovic, 2005a, 2005d, 2006, 2007a, 2008)

Value/Need for Project: We live in a world that is ever more reliant on images. Images mediate most of our transactions and communications, and image-based industries are among the world's most capital-intensive industries. The social, cultural and economic importance of these creative industries is and will remain profound – image-based digital and creative industries are proclaimed to be the next major source of employment growth in Australia. The last Strategic Industry Leaders Group policy advice to government suggests that Australia's digital content industry is estimated at \$21 billion, almost 3.5 per cent of Australia's GDP, and that it employs about 300,000 people. The cover page of its *Unlocking the Potential* Report states that its industry vision is "To achieve a sustainable and internationally competitive Digital Content Industry which doubles in value to \$42 billion by 2015" (DCITA, 2005).

For all these reasons, we consider that screen production curriculum is arguably one of the most innovative, relevant and influential fields of scholarship available to students in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences sector today. We note that this area of academia is flourishing and has been doing so for some time. This growth and development of our sector could be much greater were it not for a range of obstacles. For all its potential, screen production scholarship is not well understood by conventional academia and its informal assessment regime is not recognized by DEEWR. This has enormous consequences for the Creative Arts sector as a whole, as the inability to properly recognize and evaluate creative works inevitably translates into an inability of academia to take full advantage of the creative forms of teaching and learning now emerging in all Australian campuses. These include film, new media and associated IT activities. There is thus an urgent need to ensure that our academic standards and assessment reporting practices are inclusive of the new and emerging forms of teaching and learning. Our project aims will contribute to this process by formally defining, testing, validating and regulating academic standards, assessment and reporting practices for this sector **for the very first time**. It will provide the body of evidence by which it will be possible to negotiate with our academic regulators on behalf of 19 ASPERA member institutions. This is in every way consistent with Carrick objective (a): to promote and support strategic change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching, including curriculum development and assessment.

The outcomes of this project will assist other emerging creative arts and new media scholars, who will be consulted and invited to participate in our project deliberations and conferences. We will provide similar leadership for international film schools through our

connection with CILECT, consistent with Carrick objective (e): to develop and support reciprocal national and international arrangements for the purpose of sharing and benchmarking learning and teaching processes.

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