



ASSESSMENT OF FILMMAKING AS RESEARCH

WHAT SHOULD FILMMAKING RESEARCHERS CONSIDER WHEN SUBMITTING THEIR WORK FOR RESEARCH ASSESSMENT? HOW CAN YOU MAKE EXPLICIT THE RESEARCH COMPONENTS OF YOUR WORK?

INTRODUCTION

This case study is designed to support researchers to present their research for assessment and in doing so increase capacity and confidence, contributing to the growth of the discipline and improving its visibility within academic structures.

The challenges for non-traditional research outputs, such as films, have been discussed in feedback from national research assessment processes (REF (UK) and ERA (Australia)) and in statements and articles from established, new or experimental journals. There has been debate about whether a written statement is needed, or whether the practice can speak for itself as research. Glisovic et al. explore this issue by discussing how the statement is not a replacement for the practice but works in dialogue with it as additional information, like the relationship between a translated text and its original. This argument has largely been concluded, and all the formats we consider in this case study require a research statement in one form or another.

The creation of new knowledge or ideas is not always explicit in film work. In this way, representing filmmaking research adequately in a written medium is one challenge, but there are others which mean that transferring peer review from traditional publishing to screen-based publication cannot happen seamlessly.

These challenges include developing an emerging discipline in a traditional academic environment, creating an output that is difficult or expensive to revise, difficulties of creating anonymity where the researcher may be featured or named in the film, a shortage of experienced reviewers, and a perceived lack of established methods and standards by which filmmaking research might be evaluated. There may also be tensions between submitting a film for review and requirements, needs or wishes to exhibit it to the public, where exclusivity or rights may be an issue. Equally a film that is deemed unsuccessful in terms of public exhibition could score highly in terms of its research element (because it is innovative or experimental etc.).

This case study will focus on research assessment within three different environments – for publication (of an audio-visual artefact), in national assessment processes and for academic awards and prizes. (Film festival selection is often referred to as a proxy for academic peer review, however criteria for festivals vary and research is not usually a key component). By demonstrating the importance of review for filmmaking research we hope to inform and encourage filmmaking researchers to take an active role in the processes of review.

WHERE TO BEGIN

A first step is to ensure you know what definitions the review process you are preparing for is operating with, and what 'research' means to those you are addressing.

DEFINITIONS AND CRITERIA: ASSESSMENT

For the REF, research is defined as 'a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared...' It includes '...the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights.' Here the inclusion of the phrase 'effectively shared' is important as it might require some standard of communication with peers or the public, of the research insights from filmmaking. For ERA, research is 'the creation of new knowledge and/or use of existing knowledge in new and creative ways so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings'.

A second step is to address the criteria by which the research submission will be assessed. For example, for national assessment processes the criteria generally consist of 'originality, significance and rigour'.

RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

TRAILS

Year: 2013 **Duration:** 24.51 mins

Director/s: Wyn Mason **Cost:** £2,500

Funding source: Self-financed, University of South Wales (in-kind)

Distribution: Screenworks: www.goo.gl/xy3b6z

Synopsis: A middle-aged man has lost his enthusiasm, he simply goes through the motions of living while something inside of him has frozen. On a visit to his aging parents in West Wales with his son he revisits old childhood haunts and begins to re-connect with a lost sense of wonder.

Outcomes of assessment process:

Mason submitted *Trails* to *Screenworks* and received reviewers' statements. Both film and research statement were revised in response to the feedback received and resubmitted for publication. After revision and publication Mason submitted the film to the REF, taking into account guidance from the reviewers' comments.

Specifically, revisions for the work included the idea of using 'cynghanedd' (roughly translated as 'harmony') as a structural device, i.e. repeating the entire soundtrack over the second half of the film. The incorporation of this device improved the piece in terms of its overall artistic quality and in terms of its original contribution to knowledge.

REF statement: *Trails* falls into the category of aesthetic research where film 'work is driven by an experimental drive to find new ways to say new things' (Dovey, 2009). It sits within the sub-genre of poetry-film, which seeks to generate meaning through the creative combination of poetry and film. *Trails'* research value lies in its attempt to explore formal ways of creating a synthesis of poetry and film beyond juxtaposition, so that film form echoes poetry forms.

The film is structured in two parts, with the first half's soundtrack repeating in its entirety in the second.



The images are different, as the characters continue their journey, but are accompanied by the first half's soundtrack: poetry readings, music and sound effects.

This form reflects the Welsh poetic discipline of *cynghanedd*, which is an ancient method, still used by contemporary poets, of creating harmony within a line of poetry, where the sounds of the first half (patterns of stress, consonants and internal rhyme) are mirrored in the second, divided by the line's central pause. Within the context of this piece, the form complements the film's theme of rewriting past narrative. The repeated soundtrack aims to trigger the viewers' memory, creating a certain layering effect, as images of Part 1 are recalled whilst viewing Part 2. Connections are evoked between various sets of images, functioning as an internal rhyming device, augmenting poetry-film's ability to generate 'associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor visual text would produce on its own' (Wees, 1999:1).

DEFINITIONS AND CRITERIA: PUBLICATION

For publications, the criteria are established by the journal according to its theme and interests and should be available and accessible. It is also useful to get further clarification by reading the instructions or guidance given to peer reviewers.

Screenworks for example has a submission form including questions such as 'What were you trying to achieve?' 'What work already exists in the relevant fields of practice?' 'How do you expect to be able to advance on work that already exists?' as well as allowing scope for researchers to nominate their own criteria for assessment and use novel ways of identifying the research in their work. *Sightlines* instructs peer reviewers to consider 'How does the submission expose practice as research?' in particular examining 'Is there evidence of a particular question, issue or problem that is explored? Is there evidence of innovation (in form or content for example)? Is the work contextualised within specific social/artistic theoretical fields? Is there evidence of new knowledge, interpretation, insights or experiences? The journal *Open Screens* requests: 'an 800-1,500 word research statement, which must describe the outcomes and application of the filmmaking research, outlining how the film makes a substantial contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field.'

RESEARCH PUBLICATION

CAMREX

Year: 2017 **Duration:** 13 mins

Director/s: Mark Chapman

Cost: £3,000

Funding source: Self-funded, Northumbria University, British Council travel grant.

Distribution: 8.40 films



Published by *Screenworks*, vol.7, June 2017: www.goo.gl/esGiz9

Synopsis: *Camrex House* is a notorious homeless hostel that for 40 years has upheld a fearsome reputation. Its skewed, in-house morality perpetuated by men with complex histories. Based on interviews with hostel residents, *Camrex* constructs a series of unflinchingly visceral sequences that reveal a hidden world of untold stories.

This film is an output from Chapman's PhD., a documentary about life in a homeless men's hostel, which explores the use of documentary as a means of visualising the interior life of its contributors. The reviewers noted the strong correlation between the aims of the statement and the accompanying film. Chapman identifies the theoretical underpinnings for his research, a practice context for his past and present work, and a gap in knowledge and practice arising at the boundaries of genres

and approaches. He terms this the 'documentary interior' and sets out to investigate the possibility to render this through practice. He describes his filming methods and techniques, and how these supported his original aims and why they offered something different from typical documentary modes of production. Chapman discusses how technological developments influenced and shaped the conceptual development and vice versa, and engagement with a wider audience is demonstrated by the number and quality of the film's screenings.

DEFINITIONS AND CRITERIA: AWARD

In terms of academic awards and prizes, the AHRC Research in Film Awards, asks judges to consider how the submitted films bring new research to wider attention, exemplify excellence in the dissemination of research findings, highlight the value and importance of research in the arts and humanities and the clarity, accessibility and coherence of the film and in particular the ways in which it conveys complex ideas and research questions. The British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS) invites researchers to submit a research statement assessed in terms of evidence of originality, significance and rigour and contribution to new knowledge and understanding in your chosen field of practice. There are other academic awards including Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) award and Learning on Screen from the British Universities Film and Video Council, which are largely pedagogically focused but which can be relevant for filmmaking research.

SUBMITTING A FILM AS RESEARCH

In all three environments, the film output itself is submitted, either in its entirety or as extracts, alongside complementary written information. This may take the form of a statement and/or an accompanying portfolio.

STATEMENTS

For example, relatively short statements (300 words) are required for the REF and the AHRC Research in Film Awards and for ERA (2,000 characters). These statements must clearly, accessibly and coherently evidence a set of complex research ideas and questions. For the journal *[in]Transition*, a 300-1,000-word statement that articulates the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form is required. *Screenworks* requires a statement of up to 2,000 words covering the specific topics of research question, context, methods, outcomes (in the field), dissemination and impact. For the BAFTSS award an accompanying statement of up to 2,000 words should include 'detailed documentation of the research rationale'. The research statements for ERA must address: Research background, Field, Context, Research aim, Research contribution, Innovation, New knowledge, Research significance and Evidence of excellence.

PORTFOLIOS

In relation to other accompanying material, for the REF a digital or physical portfolio can be supplied, while the *Journal for Artistic Research (JAR)* requires submission via an 'exposition' which combines text, image, film, and audio material on expandable web pages. These multimedia packages/portfolios must provide information about the research process and/or content. For the REF, this should cover 'research imperatives and research process' through descriptive and contextualising information. The *JAR* multimedia submission should expose artistic practice as research, going beyond simply documenting, describing, or writing about work. It must engage with questions and claims about knowledge within practice. For the BAFTSS award a portfolio can be submitted, offering a 'route map' to the practice as research. The portfolio is intended to enable nominees to point towards the wider research context and other supporting documentation, such as websites, blogs, published articles, and conference papers which may support the practice in identifying research significance.

Panel feedback from the REF acknowledged the importance of creating a good portfolio (see Box 1 for details), especially in the light of the volume and variety of work submitted for review. They noted that in many cases the inclusion of portfolios to 'support and contextualise the research' was 'essential', and in successful cases, submitting units had systemically created portfolios that had 'clarity, relevance and depth'.

HOW TO DO IT

What are the requirements of supporting research documentation and what should be considered to do it well? Primarily consideration must be given to the intention of the supporting piece, and efforts made to address the criteria. In some instances, different headings are suggested or required, such as research background, research contribution, research significance. In other situations, the criteria are more general such as ensuring researchers locate the material in an academic context.

PANEL D REPORT: P99

"The best outputs were presented as portfolios or with supporting information about overriding research questions that clearly located the practice and an individual's specific contribution within academic contexts."

RESEARCH AWARD

LOVE IN THE POST: FROM PLATO TO DERRIDA

Winner of BAFTSS Practice Research Award, 2016

Year: 2014

Duration: 80 mins

Director: Joanna Callaghan

Cost: £100,000

Funding source: AHRC, University of Bedfordshire, University of Kingston, University of Sussex, Heraclitus Pictures, Crowdfunding

Distribution: DVD/ Bluray, Heraclitus Pictures. Online, Kanopy



Synopsis: *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida* is inspired by the book *The Post Card* by Jacques Derrida. The film plays with fact and fiction, weaving together the stories of a scholar of literature and a film director, alongside insights from critics and philosophers.

Research: This feature film is the fourth in a series of films produced from 'Ontological Narratives' a research project operating between 2007-2014, supported by grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The goals were to invigorate philosophy through a new approach to its enquiry (practice as research) and to bring new audiences to its content (through using fiction).

Associated outputs from the fourth iteration included five short films, a book, two journal articles, and over 20 papers and presentations. For the BAFTSS award judges consider the film, alongside a portfolio of evidence and commentary. The award success is linked with its trajectory as a longer term research project which demonstrated how questions, approaches and outputs developed and expanded through the making of the film(s) and evidenced a sustained investigation into filmic and philosophical production. With its mix of drama, art film, documentary, experimental and essay film, the film, according to the judges, 'manages to enact the theoretical concerns explored in Derrida's original text, via the practice / experience of watching the film' (2016). There was clear coherence and harmony between the supporting statement and the screenwork - but judges also noted that the film itself (which was distinct from many other pieces of practice-led enquiry) stood up as an individual and compelling piece of practice-led scholarship.

GUIDANCE TO DEVELOP A RESEARCH STATEMENT:

- Articulate a description of the question, issue or problem explored in the research.
- Explain how the research is innovative in content, form or technique.
- Provide contextual information, particularly identifying social issues the film considers, or practice context.
- Describe how the research led to new insights or knowledge.
- Identify what methodologies you chose to use, and how this relates to the question(s) addressed, and the new knowledge identified.
- Situate your research within the field as a whole, for example within theoretical or critical frameworks.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

There are some experimental approaches to publication which may have beneficial contributions to make to filmmaking research development, even though they are some way away from the more formal processes required by institutional or career development priorities. These alternative approaches include open reviewing and dialogic reviewing where there are few restrictions on submission and there may be no word limits. For example, *Sightlines* allows researchers to choose whether to submit any accompanying text, it may be of any length and identify its own assessment criteria. These approaches may help develop the discipline, improve individual researcher's work, impart an understanding of how others perceive filmmaking research and the accompanying statements may prepare researchers for more restrictive assessment models. There is a need to build in to peer review processes of filmmaking research an opportunity to change or revise the output produced. There are models provided by industry for this through examples of film development labs where rough cuts of films are revised by experts and tested in front of an audience, before a final edit. A similar model is desirable for filmmaking research to improve the quality of the output and create a body of peers engaged with developing the discipline.

FURTHER READING

- **Latest information on REF2021:** www.ref.ac.uk
- **Submission guidance for ERA 2018:** www.goo.gl/dYLdjH
- **REF Panel D report:** www.goo.gl/ativ8t
- **Smiljana Glisovic, Leo Berkeley & Craig Batty (2016) The problem of peer review in screen production: exploring issues and proposing solutions, *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 10:1, 5-19, DOI: 10.1080/17503175.2015.1133262** www.goo.gl/6Kssfc
- **AHRC research in film awards 2017:** www.goo.gl/zcVf4P
- **BAFTSS awards 2018:** www.baftss.org/baftss-awards-2018
- **JAR submission guidance:** www.jar-online.net/submissions
- **Screenworks:** www.screenworks.org.uk
- **Open Screens:** www.openscreensjournal.com/about/submissions/

ABOUT FRN

The Filmmaking Research Network (FRN) provides insight into the condition and dimensions of filmmaking as research. FRN aims to consolidate the field of filmmaking research by sharing best practice internationally, and developing resources. Funded by the AHRC, the FRN is a partnership between the University of Sussex (UK) and the University of Newcastle (Australia).

www.filmmakingresearch.net

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