

Measuring Excellence in Screen Production Research

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(ASPERA) Research Sub-Committee

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Welcome to the second Australian Screen Production and Education Research Association (ASPERA) research report. This document seeks to make a contribution to the field through crystallising key positions and taking a stance in ongoing conversations that consider how we measure quality in creative practice research. This dialogue has been active for a number of years, and ASPERA as a national peak body positions the report as one that strikes a balance between offering definitive and structured statements about research quality for screen production, and being open to revision and (especially) debate. We offer the document as a practical reference for researchers in their workplaces as well as for the broader research community. Most importantly, ASPERA wants to continue provoking researchers to articulate what screen production research quality looks (and sounds) like, and to continue to engage with quality measures as a crucial aspect of screen production research recognition. We are committed to publishing updated editions of this report that will further document and contribute to the conversation. ASPERA intends for the report to promote increased opportunities for researchers in their host institutions and beyond, and to ensure quality remains on the agenda as the screen production research discipline matures. Through the report we hope to enable more nuanced discussions to occur in the academy between researchers, research leaders and university research offices.

We sincerely hope you find the report engaging, affirming and useful. We welcome your feedback via the web form at aspera.org.au/contact/

Associate Professor James Verdon
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ASPERA President

INTRODUCTION

This document describes how the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) recognises, and therefore measures, research quality in screen production. The aim is to provide a set of guidelines and principles that can assist those who undertake and evaluate creative practice research in screen production to determine various levels of ‘excellence’. While advisory, not prescriptive, the document acknowledges that universities are increasingly focussed on ‘quality’ research, and that the discipline of screen production can benefit from a set of shared understandings about what this quality might look like.

While this document has been created with an awareness of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) guidelines, it provides an independent view of how excellence in screen production research is understood and reviewed by peers in the discipline. It is important to note, therefore, that the project was driven by the ASPERA community and was developed in consultation with the ASPERA community.

It is also important to note that references to a screen work in this document are explicitly referring to those works that are clearly operating as a research output. Using creative practice as a method to generate knowledge about process, for example, does not necessarily result in a screen work that is a research output. The screen work must contain, embody or perform research findings in order to qualify as a research output. It must be doing or offering something new in its own right, which may be based on research that informs the nature of work (content, form, style, etc.), or may be the result of an iterative process of reflection in which reflective insights shape the nature of the work. Making a screen work and then reflecting on the making of it – without then changing the film on the basis of that reflection – does not (usually) qualify the film as a research output. The film (creative work) must contribute new ideas and/or practices to provide evidence as an outcome of research.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Between 2016 and 2017, the ASPERA Research Sub-Committee worked on a project that provided an overview of the current working environments of screen production practitioner-researchers in Australian universities, with a focus on how their creative works are/are not being valued and counted as research outputs. The project was conducted through analysis of national research reports and guidelines (e.g., Excellence in Research for Australia, The Watt Review), and interviews conducted with staff working either directly in the screen production research discipline, or in broader research reporting, evaluation and mentoring roles within universities. The report, [Screen Production Research Reporting: An ASPERA Scoping Project](#), concluded that while some institutions had well developed frameworks and tools for assisting in the translation of creative practice to creative practice research, broadly there is still much work that can be championed by those in the discipline. This included better internal systems and means of support; stronger and more transparent internal mechanisms for reporting and valuing screen production research; and peak bodies such as ASPERA providing communal policies, frameworks and mentoring.

At the completion of that report, it became evident that the discipline would also benefit from having resources that define research excellence in screen production. As the peak body for screen production research (and education) in Australia, ASPERA could take a leading role in developing such resources, which might include guidelines and principles regarding frameworks for quality; and examples of where various levels of quality might be found.

ASPERA thus commissioned this project in the hope that it would benefit its community of practitioner-researchers working in Australian universities and education providers. The focus was on providing a set of indicative and tangible measures by which 'excellence' in creative practice research might be benchmarked. This was partly in response to journal rankings and publisher reputations that exist for traditional research outputs, which are often espoused by universities; and partly to help drive ASPERA's research conversations forward, with the intent of recognising excellence within the discipline and inspiring others to achieve. While focussed on the work of practitioner-researchers working in an Australian context, it is hoped that this document will also be of value to screen and media practitioner-researchers working internationally.

Starting its life at a national workshop at the Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy conference/film festival held in Melbourne, November 2016, the document was developed between November 2016 and May 2017. Content for the document was given and reviewed by a wide reference group from within the ASPERA community, including esteemed colleagues from both academic and industry/practice backgrounds. Final preparation and delivery of the document was overseen by the ASPERA Research Sub-Committee.

The guiding questions used to structure the initial workshop were as follows:

- What does excellence in screen production research look like?
- What measures can we use to ascertain this excellence?
- Do these measures differ to measures used for other kinds of research, or for varying outlets within the screen production industries?
- Do we need to attend to specific characteristics for this discipline in particular?
- Can we establish quality and esteem indicators for this discipline?

The core areas arising, and that structure this document, are:

- Key Characteristics of Screen Production Research
- Exhibitions and Screenings
- Awards, Prizes and Competitions
- Indicators of Quality and Measures of Esteem

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SCREEN PRODUCTION RESEARCH

This section outlines some of the key characteristics of what ASPERA recognises as a screen production-related research output, and includes detail of equivalences to publication and peer review where appropriate. The intention is to set the scene for the types of research output the document is concerned with, and acknowledge some of the nuances that exist in the screen production discipline, aspects that might not always be explicit in or easily translated by institutional research policies and frameworks.

Authorship

Screen production research outputs are often complex, extensive and are collaborations in which contributors perform diverse roles, sometimes across disciplines. For this reason, joint authorship of a work—multiple and varied contributions recognised in a single project—should be acknowledged. For example, a short film may include distinct contributions from a screenwriter, a director, a sound designer, an actor, etc. For this reason, it is important that a clear case is made in relation to the type and extent of research authorship being claimed for any output, and that this is recognised by the institution and in the ERA assessment process. At the same time, however, if a screen work is contributed to by two academics working at the same institution, individual submissions may be preferable where the roles are so different that the research endeavours of the practitioners are not the same. In this instance, a different research statement will make clear the role played in the work, and a different Field of Research (FoR) code may be selected (e.g., 1902—Film, Television and Digital Media versus 1904—Performing Arts and Creative Writing).

Publication

The publication of screen production research can take a number of forms at different times over the life of a work. Critical to the recognition of ‘publication’ status is that the work has undergone a process of peer review, and/or official selection by discipline experts and/or professionals through forums such as film festivals and competitions (see below). The research contribution of the work should be acknowledged and made public where possible and appropriate. This might happen explicitly or implicitly in forums such as project descriptions, websites, guest talks and interviews. Developing a publication from the work, such as a journal article about the practice, is encouraged. In the case of an industry report or similar, it must have been commissioned and should be available in the public domain.

Recognised forms of screen production research publication include: books and book chapters; academic journals; refereed conference proceedings; and where an argument for research can be made, including evidence of peer review or competitive selection: public screenings and broadcasts; exhibitions and exhibition catalogues; online publication/screening platforms; and professional journals. ASPERA also recognises awards, prizes and other ‘gate-kept’ outcomes that provide equivalence to publication for particular types of work. This could include national or international screenwriting competitions, or national or international film development awards.

Peer Review and its Equivalence

The discipline acknowledges the importance of rigorous peer review, which determines the quality of a work in regard to its scholarly contribution. This may involve artistic or aesthetic measures, but only when this is an explicit outcome of the research. This requirement is important in ascertaining the degree to which the work extends the body of knowledge and/or practice from which it draws: how it is situated, and how it contributes. The notion of ‘peer review’ needs to be teased out for the discipline of screen production.

Peer review ‘equivalence’ refers to instances in which a process of selection somewhat outside of traditional academic notions of peer review takes place. This may take the form of selection into a film festival, selection by a curator for participation in a group exhibition, or passing a competitive threshold to have a work broadcast, for example. Equivalence may also take the form of ‘post hoc’ review, such as positive write-ups in industry and mainstream press; nominations for awards and prizes; for online works, viewing figures and/or public comment; and extended screenings and broadcast types.

Screen works that have secured funding for production, or as a result of being screened attract further funding for continual development (e.g., a new edit), are deemed to have gone through a competitive selection process (i.e., quality measure) and thus worthy of being peer review equated. In cases such as this, the esteem associated with the funding body may be considered when judging the overall quality of the research output.

The discipline acknowledges that peer review and its equivalence might not take place in relation to explicitly stated contributions to knowledge/practice, but rather that the quality of a work on the basis of its new knowledge/practice is what garners its ‘approval’. Some may prefer the term ‘industry endorsement’ for this type of work, which ASPERA values as peer review equivalence given the creative practice nature of its research—as long as the work is a research output that contains, embodies or performs research findings. In these instances, evidence of research quality also needs to be demonstrated, which in the context of ERA is usually made explicit via the accompanying research statement.

Funding secured through crowd funding platforms is generally not judged as being equivalent to a competitive review process. Exceptions to this might include those projects supported by and branded as university research projects, where a form of internal peer review (prior to the crowd funding campaign being launched) has taken place. Over time, however, it is envisaged that crowd funded research projects may feature more prominently in the academy, and our understanding of peer review may change.

Creative Works

Creative practice research outputs are a staple of the discipline and should be accorded equal standing alongside traditional research outputs. There are, however, numerous complex and subjective aspects to this form of research that should be taken into account regarding quality. One of these is the difference between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ works,

which can be equated to a monograph (major) and a book chapter (minor) in traditional publishing. While different forms, genres and roles might require different levels of research to accomplish their aims (i.e., computer animation versus observational documentary)—and, of course, there being a wide range of research methods available to the practitioner—some general principles that might distinguish a major work from a minor work, which might also relate to whether or not smaller works are combined to make a portfolio (see below), include:

- Feature film versus short film
- Feature-length screenplay versus short format screenplay
- Web series creator and/or writer versus writer of a number of web series episodes
- Solo exhibition/installation versus group exhibition/installation

The role undertaken on a project may determine not only the ‘size’ of the contribution, but also its importance/quality – though this is likely to be a contentious idea in some circles. In all cases, it is necessary to articulate how the role was underpinned by research. How was the practice a research practice?

Significant creative works, judged as such by expert peers in the discipline, can constitute the highest levels of achievement in screen production research and would be the equivalent to at least an award-winning monograph. The significance of such a contribution, where the work can clearly be argued to be the result of research, is likely to be established and communicated in the discipline through a number of means. These could include awards and prizes, professional journals, industry and mainstream media (captured by, for example, Altmetrics), books and articles produced by others that cite the work, and fellow screen practitioners who state, in the public domain, that the work has influenced their own work (or thinking about their work).

Journals

Increasingly, there are a number of online journals that publish screen production works as research, such as Screenworks, [in]Transition and Sightlines. These are encouraged by ASPERA, and while some universities may view online (and new) journals as less prestigious than established (mainstream) journals, it is important for the discipline that screen production-specific outlets are used to disseminate work. This will, over time, increase their standing in the academy, which will benefit researchers in the discipline. Regarding screenwriting, short research-based screenplays can be published in creative writing journals (e.g., New Writing, TEXT) and this is also encouraged. In all current practice-based academic journals, peer review operates along traditional lines.

Portfolios of Work

ASPERA also recognises professional (non-peer reviewed) journals that provide a critical forum guided by an editorial board comprising representatives with a strong track record in screen production and high peer esteem. It is appropriate that professional journal contributions by authors are included as portfolios of work within the ERA peer review process for creative research outputs, as long as the research contribution can be articulated. A portfolio of such

publications, which might range from 5 to 50 pieces, may demonstrate a sustained critical enquiry that has led to the production of new knowledge. A body of editorials or reviews, which engage with the discipline and its practitioners, could be an example of such a portfolio of work.

ASPERA maintains that such works are fundamental components of research in screen production, particularly when they locate a practice in the context of other practices and critical ideas. Significant portfolios of work can be equivalent to the highest levels of research output in screen production. This is especially the case for highly regarded outlets that might not, on their own, constitute having undergone rigorous peer review. Examples include:

- Film Quarterly
- Metro Magazine (non-peer reviewed stream)
- Photogénie
- Screen Education
- Screen International
- Senses of Cinema (non-peer reviewed stream)
- Other industry and guild journals.

Books and Book Chapters

Books and book chapters about the making of screen works are recognised as research if the publication has, as its primary intent, a sustained critical enquiry relating to the practice conducted (or that of others). This may be in a traditional academic sense or as a creative work. Books and book chapters that do not move beyond a description of screen production projects, such as reviews, are not recognised as research outputs. Regarding textbooks and other educational publications, these are not usually recognised as a research output unless there is new knowledge—including new analysis of practice and methodologies of practice—that is substantiated by suitable references. Publisher reputation and post-hoc review may be required to support research contribution in these instances.

The quality of books and book chapters may be determined by the level of peer recognition of the publisher, and by the level of peer esteem of the contributing authors, editors and/or those whose commendations are published with the work (e.g., as a preface or foreword to the work).

Some example quality criteria regarding journal prestige, publisher reputation and the significance of venues that screen or exhibit creative works is given below. These criteria have been developed as a guide only, though as described, are informed by publicly available metrics and a general consensus of quality from the ASPERA community.

EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS

A screen production research work is recognised as an output when screened solo or as part of a group exhibition often in film festivals, gallery shows and public space contexts. Screenings include broadcast, film distribution and online platforms where peer review or its equivalence can be demonstrated. The quality of the research can be aligned to its level of peer review, which might relate to curators, festival directors or selection committees as determined by the discipline, as well as other factors such as positive reviews of the work and attendance or viewing figures. The standing of the host organisation or the esteem assigned to those involved in selection can also be a measure of quality in this context.

The screen work must, as highlighted above, clearly be a research output in order to qualify for this category. Using creative practice as a method to generate knowledge about process does not necessarily result in a screen work that is a research output. The screen work must contain, embody or perform the outcomes of research in order to qualify as a valid research output.

The following are some examples of what ASPERA considers the highest level of achievement in screen production research, as evidenced by the standing of the organisation and/or the people involved in selection:

- Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards
- Adelaide Film Festival
- Berlin International Film Festival
- British Association of Film and Television Arts Film Awards
- Cannes Film Festival
- Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival
- International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam
- Melbourne International Film Festival
- Sheffield Documentary Festival
- Sundance Film Festival
- Sydney Film Festival
- South by Southwest
- Toronto Film Festival
- Tribeca Film Festival
- Venice Film Festival

AWARDS, PRIZES AND COMPETITIONS

Awards and prizes can be assessed using the same principles for peer review and publication as described above. In the case of awards and prizes, peer review is usually conducted through judging panels that identify submitted or solicited works of merit. The qualities of a work are assessed on the basis of published criteria, and are benchmarked against the works of peers. ASPERA recognises awards programs and prizes that have a critical, rather than advertorial, objective as legitimate forms of peer review, and for which judging panels are comprised of esteemed peers.

Awards and prizes—as well as commendations and citations—provide substantial evidence of the quality of a research output, and for ERA they should be contextualised accordingly in the accompanying research statement. The quality of research as recognised through awards and prizes can be determined by the discipline profile of the award or prize, as well as the peer esteem of the judging panel.

The following are examples of what ASPERA considers to be high-level achievement in the Australian awards and prizes arena:

- Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Awards
- Australian Cinematographers Society National Awards
- Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Awards
- Dendy Awards for Australian Short Films
- Stanley Hawes Award for Documentary (Australian International Documentary Conference)

The quality of screen production research as recognised through competitions can be understood according to similar principles as those described for awards and prizes. Some competitions offer a forum for anonymous peer review throughout the judging process, which is akin to traditional academic peer review. Some, however, cannot offer anonymity due to, for example, film credits. Short-listings, commendations and awards made through competitions should be recognised as the equivalence of peer review. In some instances, invited competition entries are more highly regarded than open competitions, in that invitations to submit are based on a knowledge of the quality of the practitioner's work. Competitions judged by panels that do not include esteemed peers are not recognised as quality assured research outputs.

Examples of highly regarded competitions in Australia include:

- Flickerfest International Film Festival
- Monte Miller Screenplay Award (Australian Writers Guild)

Awards, commendations, short-listings and citations earned through international competitions that have judging panels of high international esteem are examples of research output at the highest level.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY AND MEASURES OF ESTEEM

This section outlines what ASPERA recognises as a hierarchy of quality in regard to research output. Driven by the needs and scoring system of ERA, but taking a broader approach to try and encourage increased excellence in the discipline, the descriptors and examples are aimed at providing guidance for researchers and research leaders. Journal examples have been derived from internationally recognised benchmarking sources such as SCImago, Scopus and the European Reference Index for the Humanities.

Well Above World Standard (ERA 5)

Text-based outputs are published by one of the most prestigious academic publishers in the world or by one of the leading journals in the discipline. The publisher or journal is recognised for publishing work that shapes the field, has very low acceptance rates, and whose editorial boards and teams are steered by known international discipline leaders, including those from top performing institutions. The publisher or journal follows exhaustive peer review processes. The output itself may be characterised as having scholarly influence and respect well above world standard. ASPERA does, however, acknowledge that journal rankings change regularly, and various factors can influence such rankings.

Indicative Examples

An original sole or joint authored book based on a major programme of research that stands as a major contribution to the discipline, published by a world leading press. Examples include: MIT Press; Edinburgh University Press; Columbia University Press; Oxford University Press; Cambridge University Press.

An original article of substantial word length based on a major programme of research, which makes a major contribution to the discipline, and which appears in what is widely taken to be a leading journal in the field. Examples include: Screen; Television and New Media; Screening the Past; Camera Obscura; Games and Culture; Convergence.

Book chapters would not generally be included in this rating, unless they can be shown to have been exceptionally influential in their field and stand as 'key essays' in the discipline. If included, they will be published by leading presses (see above) and edited by leading figures in the discipline.

Creative works feature in outlets and venues recognised by leading peers in the discipline as being of pre-eminent international standing. The works demonstrate research at the leading edge and that are shaping the discipline. The works show evidence of outstanding performance well above world standard.

Indicative Examples

Creative works exhibited or published in leading venues that are known internationally to be of an exceptionally high standard. Examples include: international biennales (Venice, Sydney); international museums (Tate Modern, MOMA,

Whitechapel Gallery); Australian museums and galleries (ACMI; GOMA; MCA; NGA; NGV); acclaimed/top tier international film festivals (Cannes, Toronto, Berlin, London); international broadcasters (ABC, BBC, SBS, PBS); and acclaimed international games/HCI conferences and meetings (CHI, ISEA).

Above World Standard (ERA 4)

Text-based outputs are published by an internationally leading academic publisher or by a journal of very high quality. The publisher or journal is recognised for publishing work that influences the field, has low acceptance rates, and whose editorial boards and teams are steered by known discipline leaders, including many from respected institutions. The publisher or journal follows stringent peer review processes. The outlet demonstrates the author's engagement with the global research community in the field and the output itself may be characterised as demonstrating a scholarly contribution above world standard.

Indicative Examples

An original sole- or joint-authored book, based on a major programme of research, which stands as a highly respected contribution to the discipline and is published by an internationally leading publisher in the discipline. Examples include: Wiley-Blackwell; Palgrave Macmillan; Routledge; I.B. Tauris; Bloomsbury Academic; Polity Press; Sage.

An original article of substantial word length, based on a major programme of research, that appears in what is widely taken to be a respected journal in the field. The article should make an important contribution to the subject or field. Examples include: Senses of Cinema (when peer reviewed); New Writing; Journal of Screenwriting; Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television; Critical Studies in Television; New Media and Society; Media International Australia; Fibreculture Journal.

An original book chapter of substantial word length that appears in a collection involving a number of leading academics in the field, is published by a strong academic publisher, and is edited by key academics in the discipline. The chapter should represent an important contribution to its field.

Creative works feature in outlets and venues recognised by discipline peers as delivering outputs at consistently high international standing. The works demonstrate research at the high end of the discipline. The works show evidence of performance above world standard.

Indicative Examples

Creative works exhibited or published in internationally respected venues that are known to be of a high standard. Examples include: PICA; Australian Centre for Photography; Institute of Modern Art; Melbourne International Film Festival; Sydney Film Festival; London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival; New Zealand Film Festival; TEXT; New Writing; Independent Games Festival.

At World Standard (ERA 3)

Text-based outputs are published by a respected academic or specialist publisher or by a journal of high quality. The publisher or journal is recognised for publishing work that demonstrates research of world standard, has low acceptance rates, and whose editorial boards and teams are steered by known scholars from good research institutions. The publisher or journal follows sound peer review processes. The outlet demonstrates the author's engagement with a national, regional or international research community in the field and the output itself is characterised as having a scholarly contribution at world standard.

Indicative Examples

An original sole- or joint-authored book, based on a solid programme of research, published with a respected academic or specialist publisher in the field, which stands as a good contribution to the discipline. Examples include: Intellect Books; McFarland Press; Scarecrow Press; Sense Publishers; Ashgate; New South Books.

An original article of substantial word length that appears in what is widely taken to be a respected journal in the field. The article should make a respected contribution to the subject or field. Examples include: Media Practice and Education; Film Studies; Studies in Australasian Cinema; Refractory; Journal of Simulation; The International Journal of Virtual Reality.

An original book chapter that appears in a collection published by a respected academic or specialist publisher, edited by respected academics in the discipline. The chapter should represent an original contribution to its field.

Creative works feature in outlets and venues recognised as regularly delivering work of an international standing. The works demonstrate research at a solid position in the discipline. The works show evidence of performance at world standard.

Indicative Examples

Creative works exhibited or published in national and regional galleries, film festivals, broadcasters, games/HCI conferences and meetings, and journals that fall short of 'above world standard' status. Examples include: IndieCade; A Maze; St Kilda Film Festival; Human Rights Arts and Film Festival; Griffith Review; Screenworks.

Below World Standard (ERA 1-2)

All outputs meet ERA eligibility but do not meet the criteria of the higher tiers. The peer review processes of the venue or outlet reflect sub-discipline priorities that contribute to discipline discussion and localised debates only. The output shows evidence of performance below world standard.

ESTEEM

While not necessarily linked to the production of research or the quality of a research output, esteem is another important indicator for those working in the screen production academic community. Esteem is a measure of ‘success’ of the researcher, which is likely to be based on their research outputs (at least in part), and can be used in narratives that accompany research submissions to provide evidence of an excellent research environment, such as those written for ERA and research funding applications.

Examples of esteem in screen production research include:

- Editorial role of a recognised professional journal
- Editorial role of a recognised academic journal
- Contribution to a prestigious work of reference
- Curatorial/directorial role of a prestigious film festival
- Recipient of a prestigious prize, commission or award
- Invited membership of a selection panel for a prestigious prize, commission or award
- Invited keynote address at a prestigious conference or event
- Recipient of a nationally competitive research fellowship
- Elected Fellowship of a Learned Academy (Humanities, Social Sciences, etc.)
- Citation of work by an educational or government body
- Executive/board position on the Australian Writers’ or Directors’ Guild

