

Creative practice as a research tool: benefits and pitfalls



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Abstract

In this paper I examine how my creative practice as a filmmaker prepared me for academia. I argue that the rigors of filmmaking are transferable to other disciplines.

Soon after having my doctoral research proposal accepted and cleared by the ethics committee, without really knowing or understanding the journey and task that lay before me, and fired by the bravado that is characteristic of many of the filmmakers I know (myself included), I commenced interviewing. I had yet to settle on a theoretical framework, but from my work as a director and editor of documentary films and videos, I felt I had sufficient understanding and experience of working themes and narratives into structures to tackle the general questions of my research. My approach to the interviews was, in hindsight, fairly traditional. After the first interview I abandoned the idea of working with a small video crew to gather the data and opted to interview and video the rock collectors and their collections alone. This approach had a number of benefits. It gave me greater flexibility in terms of using my time with the collector and it permitted me in some way to get closer to the collector and gain their confidence. In these circumstances there are things the collector might say in a one-to-one recording session that they may not say if others are immediately present. I videoed the interviewees, as well as the individual rocks and minerals in the collections and the collections as a whole in a conventional television documentary style: medium wide shots of the collector with their collection; mid- shots of the collector with individual rocks; close-ups of the rocks and groups of rocks and wide shots of the collections and their environs. Through reflecting on this filmmaking process, I aim to highlight the transferable knowledge that filmmakers may offer other academic disciplines. Filmmaking itself has always been a hybrid of science and art and this paper calls upon filmmakers to utilise their creative practices, including aesthetics, to the service of other disciplines, in the hope that the outcomes produce data that is useful and is integrated in the discourses of social sciences, cultural studies and other disciplines.

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Creative practice as a research tool: benefits and pitfalls

Just as warning, Foucault (1979, p. 141) asks, what for me is an important question, “who is speaking?” And he examines the emergence and valorisation of the author. In this paper I examine how my creative practice as a filmmaker prepared me for academia. I argue that the rigors of film theory and filmmaking are transferable to other disciplines and I apologise in advance for any self-valorisation.

In the recent past I completed my Doctorate titled *Rock stories: the discourse of rocks and rock- collecting* (2008). I did not make a film. I had two degrees in filmmaking and had worked as a practicing filmmaker for some twenty years and I

wanted to do something different. It is quite possible that, being invited to teach in an institution where most of my peers with post-graduate degrees had written a thesis, I wanted to run with the pack. It is also possible that having seen a number of my filmmaking colleagues take up lecturing posts and commence post-graduate studies with the intention of making a film, then find that the demands of teaching and the resources, in terms of material and crew available to them, made completion, with the film they wanted to make, a difficult proposition, and either pulled out or, like me, wrote a thesis. And so I opted for a written thesis.

As part of my proposal and before I commenced interviewing rock-collectors, I initially reviewed texts in the areas of rocks and collecting drawn from what Buck-Morss (1989) termed 'traditional academic concerns' or as described by Procter (2005) in her guide to writing a literature review: 'what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers' (p. 1). The review included texts from geology, archaeology and anthropology; history and memory; aesthetics and economics; nature and the environment; and, of course, collecting itself; texts that demonstrated humanity's relationship with rocks and illustrated the features of collecting in general. The review included my initial forays into theoretical frameworks such as semiotics, psychology, structuralism and post-structuralism that would assist me to analyse and communicate my findings. Having made *Landscape and you* (Dinham, Phillips and Karpathakis, 1996), a twelve part television series on artists and their relationships with landscape and all that it entailed, working as producer, director, script editor and editor, the task of preparing a literature review and proposal, including a schedule and a budget, had many parallels with documentary research, scriptwriting and production management.

Soon after having my research proposal accepted and cleared by the ethics committee, without really knowing or understanding the journey and task that lay before me, and fired by the bravado that is characteristic of many of the filmmakers I know (myself included), I commenced interviewing. Despite the literature review, I had yet to settle on a theoretical framework, but from my work as a director and editor of documentary films and videos, I felt I had sufficient understanding and experience of working themes and narratives into structures to tackle the general questions of my research. My approach to the interviews was, in hindsight, fairly traditional.

After the first interview I abandoned the idea of working with a small video crew to gather the data and opted to interview and video the collectors and their collections alone. This approach had a number of benefits. It gave me greater flexibility in terms of using my time with the collector and it permitted me in some way to get closer to the collector and gain their confidence. In these circumstances there are things the collector might say in a one-to-one recording session that they may not say if others are immediately present. I videoed the interviewees, as well as the individual rocks and minerals in the collections and the collections as a whole in a conventional television documentary style: medium wide shots of the collector with their collection; mid-shots of the collector with individual rocks; close-ups of the rocks and groups of rocks and wide shots of the collections and their environs.

If I were making a television documentary, this was certainly one way of achieving a result. Needless to say I completed my thesis and, although no film in a traditional sense has yet emerged from the work, I have utilised stills from my interviews in the body of the text and video clips of my interviews at conferences. **My experiences have led me to ask in what way did my training as a filmmaker prepare me for post-graduate research and academia.**

The United Kingdom Research Council lays out a list of generic training requirements for post-graduate research students that include:

original, independent and critical thinking ... demonstrate awareness of issues relating to rights of other researchers, of research subjects... understand the processes of funding and evaluation of research...apply effective project management through the setting of research goals, intermediate milestones and prioritisation of activities... demonstrate a willingness and ability to learn and acquire knowledge...demonstrate flexibility and open-mindedness... understand one's behaviour and impact on others when working in and contributing to success of formal and informal teams... (2009).

Though the list is not all inclusive, anyone with a grounding in film and video production would recognise that these attributes are not only the attributes of a good researcher but also of a good filmmaker.

An examination of texts for students writing for film, for example *The film experience: an introduction* by Corrigan and White (2009) reveals an array of theoretical frameworks by which film, "a complex art", may be observed and analysed. These include semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, psycho-analysis, feminist theory, ethnographic and historical frameworks. Looking further afield, one may include post-modernism and post-colonialism. In many ways the

study of film resembles Foucault's (1972, p. 121) open approach to analysis in the sense that it does not preclude other modes of analysis but rather incorporates and complements them:

it does not replace a logical analysis of propositions, a grammatical analysis of sentences, a psychological or contextual analysis of formulations: it is another way of attacking verbal performances, of dissociating their complexity, of isolating the terms that are entangled in its web, and of locating the various regularities that they obey.

The range and variety of theoretical frameworks examined and utilized by film scholars and historians would prepare the film student for research in many disciplines outside film studies and production. The study of critical cinema – a verisimilitude of life, society and its relations – can stand in for actuality and for demonstrating in an abstract fashion the application of social and psychological theories. This is not to say that students of film will approach other disciplines as theoretical anarchists, but with “flexibility and open-mindedness”, and that students successful in film theory would also be able to “demonstrate a willingness and ability to learn and acquire knowledge” (UK Grad programme, 2009).

In addition to the theoretical frameworks utilised by film scholars for analysis, filmmakers require an educated and developed sense of visual language and grammar. From a practical point of view, the filmmaker as researcher possesses an awareness of what to show to reveal significant subjects, objects and relationships. This does away with the surveillance or monitoring approach witnessed in many disciplines in the acquisition of data on video or film, which may be viewed as messy data. Mead, viewed by many as a progenitor of ethnographic film, argued for an objective methodology in the use of recording technology in anthropology:

If tape recorder, camera or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed (Cited in Weinberger, 1996, p. 150).

Weinberger rightly critiques this as “a utopian mechanism – a panopticon with limitless film” (1996, p. 150). Along with this objective and seemingly scientific approach to acquiring data, the questions for the research would have to be developed or discovered after the data has been collected. The questions for the researcher, however, need to be formed before the note taking or filming begins. For filmmakers utilising the camera as a tool for acquiring data – shooting with intention – this is an established practice. An understanding of visual language for the researcher will lead to data that will be more useful in the analysis stage.

The collection and configuration of images can, however, have other qualities. Conventional ethnographic filmmakers utilised the surveillance approach to collecting visual data – everything shot at a distance with a wide-angle lens. There have been, however, ethnographers whose cinematic approach has revealed other truths through the use of close-ups and the array of shots associated with other forms of filmmaking. Weinberger (1996, p.157) discussing the film *The Nuer* (Harris and Breidenbach, 1970) states:

(The *Nuer* offers) one of the few instances where ethnographic film presents information that is beyond the capabilities of the written monograph. Not observed and analysed data: it is a physical and intellectual act of seeing.

Weinberger (1996, p.162) again, this time describing Gardner's *Deep Hearts* (1978) states: The film underscores what is obvious elsewhere: there are vast areas of human life to which scientific methodology is inapt; to which ethnographic description must give way to the ethnopoetic: a series of concrete and luminous images, arranged by intuition rather than prescription, and whose shifting configuration – like the point of and between the constellations – map out a piece of a world.

The approach utilised by Harris, Breidenbach and Gardner for making *The Nuer* (1970) and *Deep Hearts* (1979) is that used by filmmakers in traditional entertainment, commercial and artistic forms. Harris and Breidenbach by using close ups and medium close ups, pick out the aspects they wished to examine and analyse, that answer, so to speak, the questions they asked. This approach is grounded in dealing and adjusting with events as they occur and accepts the limited scope of any inquiry. Their approach can be contrasted with shooting everything in wide shot and working out what is interesting later – a working out of the questions after the event.

Weinberger (1996, pp. 137-138) describes how the tribe of “ethnographers” devoted to the “practices known as science” use the term “aesthete” as a pejorative term for those ethnographers suspected of bowing to the demands of aesthetics,

associated with the practice known as “art”. The time has come, after a hundred or more years, for this pedagogically immature behaviour to cease, and to recognise that the antagonism between science and art is arbitrary. The best practitioners in both fields often utilise the elements of the other to strengthen and communicate their works, their arguments or discoveries. Filmmaking itself has always been a hybrid of science and art and this paper calls upon filmmakers to utilise their creative practices, including aesthetics, to the service of other disciplines, in the hope that the outcomes produce data that is useful and is integrated in the discourses of social sciences, cultural studies and other disciplines. There are numerous approaches to research where filmmaking as a creative practice may be a methodological tool: phenomenological research with its commitment to “the appearance of things in their specificity” (Nichols, 1994, p. 81), qualitative research or descriptive research. Ironically for filmmakers, the term used by many social researchers for their subjects is actors, and the metaphor continues with some researchers, for example Goffman (1974), who uses the term ‘framing’ for the situations where the “social actors” – the subjects – act.

It should be clear that I am not describing the use of moving image in cultural and social research as defined by Nichols (1994, p. 66):

ethnographic film will refer to films that are extra-institutional, that address an audience larger than anthropologists per se, that may be made by individuals more trained in filmmaking than in anthropology, and that accept as a primary task the representation, or self-representation of one culture for another.

Nor am I talking about the camera as a tool of surveillance, where everything is shot and then the research questions arise out of what is seen. What is being discussed is the acquiring of moving images and synchronous sound initially as data for research. After the initial acquisition and analysis, the data may have secondary uses that may include ethnographic film (but not necessarily so). It may also be used to present the finding of the research at conferences, in e- journals and other sites. Though traditional knowledge is found in books, in the digital age the means of transmission and presentation can be more diverse and reach a wider audience, perhaps, initially academics in different disciplines and then beyond to a more general ‘readership’.

In 1994, Nichols also pointed to many of the pitfalls of ethnographic film, and his chapter *The Ethnographer’s Tale* should act as a warning and also a guide to those who wish to use the moving image and the practices it embodies as a research tool. Nichols (1993), however, was writing at a time when film and analogue video, and the expense of processing and editing, limited the use of the moving image and sound as a research tool. Today, digital technology has made the capture and utilization of the moving image ubiquitous. Nichols (1994, p. 79) described the earlier advent of “lightweight, synchronous recording equipment” as a paradigm shift in the making of ethnographic and documentary films. The emergence and convergence of digital technologies where the mobile phone and the compact stills camera can record usable (from a research point of view) synchronous sound and moving pictures also presents a new paradigm for researchers. To rephrase Nichols, can the convergence of technologies lead to “a reconceptualization” of cultural and social research? Will the handicam; the compact camera and the mobile phone become the new notebook for the researcher? In some cases it already has. And will the e-journal, multi-media website, DVD and PowerPoint presentation replace or complement the printed journal? That too has come to pass. For the researcher what will not change are the interpretation or interpretations and analyses of what is seen and heard. This will, in all possibility, be textual within the literary tradition.

Regardless of what you have heard or read, size matters – from the 16mm camera, the beta- cam, the handy-cam; the Steenbeck or Moviola, to the VCR, the CMX editing computers to the hard drive that holds all that you have shot – accessibility, cost and portability of technologies all affect the circumstances of use and the nature of the result. Where once 16mm film and film laboratories or one-inch tapes machines and CMX editing systems were required, a revolution has occurred. The process of organising, of correlating, of editing and, in the end, manufacturing the final product can all occur in a little box – the laptop. Along with the reduction of size have been the ever increasing automation, computerization and connectedness of the equipment and the collapse and erasure of the divisions of labour, the merging of skills and the emergence of a more multi-disciplinary approach to filmmaking.

On my first documentary, I had a crew of greater than six, including camera, sound recordist, boom swinger, assistant director and director; on my last documentary, I had a crew of three including the composer. For my research, where I utilised the skills and practices acquired in my filmmaking, I, except for my first interview, was the crew. To cite Steve Earle (2005) talking about digital audio: “What I found out was the technology lent itself to me working by myself”. Further, with images and sound recorded directly to hard drive, comes the ability to replay and review what has been recorded almost

immediately. This may allow the subject to comment to what has been recorded, or to guide the researcher to new observations and recordings. This immediacy would influence action research, where feedback guides the research process.

The processes and efficiencies of industry underpin both filmmaking and research. For a creative practice, the procedures for making films can be a very bureaucratic affair. In pre-production the production manager must budget, acquire the appropriate permissions and organise a schedule. During the shoot continuity tracks the events that occur with, hopefully, precise descriptions of technical parameters. With contemporary technology these parameters are recorded automatically on the medium itself. Going through the rushes, the filmmaker refines the continuity sheets and with an overview of what has been achieved, notes what is useful. In the editing process the material is logged, and in a documentary, the logging can become very precise in terms of transcriptions of what is said and descriptions of what is seen. In old-fashioned terms, a lot of paperwork, and, in today's terms, a lot of computer input, is generated. The logging tools in contemporary editing platforms such as Premier Pro and Final Cut Pro are, in reality, powerful databases that permit the tracking of the acquired material. All of these procedures have analogies to research practice. The researcher needs to budget their project, acquire the appropriate permissions (within a University environment this includes ethics clearance), and produce a research schedule. In the field, whilst acquiring data, the researcher is required to make and keep detailed notes. The data acquired is initially reviewed and coded – what was said and what happened – and places what has been acquired in a database. The practices of filmmaking and primary research in the field have strong parallels and would enable some of those trained in filmmaking to transform their creative practice into an equally useful research tool.

At the 2009 ATLC/ASPERA conference Greg Battye's presentation on the research of group work within the film and video course at the University of Canberra, that incorporated a website, text and video, demonstrates that my argument was not necessarily unique. However, Battye had co-opted a number of practitioners to acquire his data and the creation of the report and its internet presence had been a collaborative work of an editorial committee and required a number of people. The work is commendable and provides, in a way, a working model of what I am proposing. If I have a quibble, it is that it was only looking at film students, film educators and film education. It was an examination of one's face in the mirror, a similar technique and approach lends itself to a range of disciplines, if we, as practitioners, are prepared to look beyond the screen.

I have attended a number of conferences and seminars, including the weekly Wednesday seminar held at my University, and I have witnessed senior lecturers and emerging researchers present material that called for the use of images and testimonies from the subjects of the research. I was, needless to say, often disappointed. Presenters put forward strong arguments and provide engaging and interesting anecdotes, but all too often no images, no video clips – in fact very little other than their voice and the paper they read from, and yet the topics researched and written about scream for images. And as I watched the presenters reading from papers to the conference or seminar, grasping the papers as if a life raft in a stormy sea, I came to the conclusion that training as a filmmaker or as a media worker really prepares you for post-graduate studies and research in the twenty-first century. And I hope that the media tools and skills we provide our undergraduates will serve them in many fields. The study of media and film theory and production in the twenty-first century is akin to the study of liberal arts in the twentieth century.

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