

Applying creativity theories to a documentary filmmaker's practice



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Abstract

The generally accepted definition for a documentary is '*the creative treatment of actuality*' (Grierson, 1933, p. 8). Documentary scholars have rigorously discussed and dissected, the meaning that Grierson may have intended for this phrase, (Corner, 1996; Higson, 1995; Montagu, 1964; Winston, 1995). While the terms 'treatment' and 'actuality' have been debated and defined, interpretations of creativity that cite psychological and socio-cultural creativity research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sawyer, 2006; Sternberg, 1988, 1999) do not appear in the literature to date.

My PhD research on video and online documentary practice made me increasingly aware of this knowledge gap in the theories about creativity. Of particular concern were the assumptions about film-making creativity that are embedded in language, terminology and definitions that academics and film-making practitioners use to explain film-making creativity and creative processes. Many of them seem not to be aware of the latest research into creativity. Using a practitioner-led research methodology, Practitioner Based Enquiry (Murray, 2000), this paper will examine some elements of my Fort Scratchley documentary film-making research and these reflective accounts will be discussed in relation to three relatively recent theoretical perspectives of creativity all of which come from the creativity research literature. Firstly the documentary production process will be examined using a staged creative process (Bastick, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Wallas, 1976). The second theoretical model to be 'tested-out' is the systems model of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) which presents an holistic view of the creative system at work. The final theory presented will examine 'group creativity' which accounts for collaborative group work (Paulus, 2003). The conclusion will discuss the appropriateness of each of these creativity theories to documentary film-making practice.

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The terms *creativity*, *creative*, and *creative process* are scattered throughout film-making and documentary texts. Closer readings of the usage of these terms reveal inconsistencies that from a creative research point of view are worth clarifying. [For examples see Austin, 2009; Compesi, 2007; Proferes, 2005; Dancyger 2003; Mollison, 2003; Rosenthal, 2002, Rabiger, 2004; Dannbaum, Hodge, & Mayer, 2003; Nichols, 2001; Wayne, 1997; Renov, 1993; Ayres et al. 1990] ¹. These texts have a tendency to perpetuate the romantic and/or commonsense understanding of creativity (Sawyer, 2006, pp. 9-33). One of the flaws of the romantic ideal, which tends to underpin much writing about film-making creativity, is that filmmaker's are viewed as artists 'who see their own creative activity as fundamentally self-expressive' (McIntyre, 2008b, p. 1; Zolberg, 1990, p. 116). Now largely outdated, auteur theory supported a similar notion where the director creates a film solely from within (Buscombe in Caughie et al, 1981:23). While auteur theory has been rigorously critiqued, calls to create

a film creation theory which locate the director in a total situation (Bruscombe, 1981: 32) are still emerging. One of the underlying purposes of this paper is to address this knowledge gap, from a practitioner's point of view, using creativity theories². Pope argues that more research is necessary to better understand and foster acts of creation (2005, p. 38), whereas Bailin points out that examinations of creative products may not actually foster creativity (Bailin, 1988, p. 84), arguing instead that it might be more advantageous to focus investigations on how products are created and the processes of creation (Bailin, 1988, p. 85).

In 1964, one of Grierson's disciples, Montagu, began to explore the difference between a documentary product and the documentary film-maker's process when he argued that:

In a sense every art work is the creative treatment of actuality. Actuality is the raw material that, as experience, must pass through the consciousness of the creative artist [or group] to become transformed by labour and in accordance with technical and aesthetic laws into the art product. Presumably Grierson is referring not to actuality in that sense but to actuality in the sense that the raw material which the documentary film worker composes is the cinematographic record of visual aspects of reality. (Montagu, 1964, p. 281)

Montagu's terminology is clearly practitioner focused, while also focusing on the creative processes and constraints of the documentary practitioner in the light of the distinctions he presumes Grierson is making. Furthering this particular discussion are two authors who define creativity and creative processes in relation to film-making practice (Petrie, 1989, 1991; Wayne, 1997). Wayne explains creativity using the renaissance craftworker's example, driving home the argument that during the renaissance period the 'concept of authorial expression, as we understand it today, simply did not exist' (Wayne, 1997, p. 14) therefore removing any notion that the craftworker was engaged in a magical or mysterious process...

[this] makes creativity earthy, physical. In this conception creativity requires a constant learning process, a sense that the cultural worker is always an apprentice to knowledge. Creativity in this concept requires planning and preparation (Wayne, 1997, p. 14)

Alternatively, Petrie's research examines creativity and the British cinema, and takes a holistic approach to the technologically driven, collaborative based staged process of film-making (Petrie, 1989). Drawing from the understandings of creativity and film-making discussed above, the argument begins to reveal itself, in that creativity in film-making is about more than individual talent embodied in the film-maker.

Creativity researchers have confirmed that studying uniquely gifted and talented artists and individuals (Sternberg, 1988, 1994) does not necessarily unlock the key to being more creative. However, what Sternberg's research has done is help us to better understand the social and cultural aspects of creativity and has led to an application of these, through research, to various creative domains. Examinations of practitioners' creative production processes do already exist in some creative domains³ resulting in this definition:

Creativity is seen as an activity where some process or product, one that is considered to be unique and valuable, comes about from a set of antecedent conditions through the conditioned agency of someone' (McIntyre, 2006, p. 2).

In regards to creative film-making production practice, this paper will make sense of this definition through an examination of various creativity theories and how they enable researchers to recognise the individual film-makers capacity for learning and collaboration. This examination will begin with a look at the processes of film production.

Film production, and consequently documentary production, is made up of five stages; conceptualisation, pre-production, production, post-production and distribution (Ayers, 1992, p. 5; Cohen, 2009, p. 95). Creativity researchers have also laid out creative process theories as a staged process (Bastick, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Nemiro, 2004; Wallas, 1976), making it possible to parallel the creative and film-making processes. Csikszentmihalyi argues the creative process has five stages:

preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation elaboration

Wallas argues that it is a four staged process (1976);

preparation, incubation, illumination, verification

Whereas Bastick argues it is made up of two stages;

intuition, verification

Bastick, Wallas and Csikszentmihalyi are not the only ones to produce creative process models (Nemiro, 2004) but these three creative processes demonstrate a logical progression whereby a practitioner follows a predictable staged process. This staged process emphasises the learning of skills and knowledge so that action or practice can be carried out. What can be seen in the table below is that using a linear interpretation that employs repetition of some of the staged creative processes, it is possible to apply Csikszentmihalyi's, Wallas and Bastick's creative stages to the stages of film production.

These creative stages have been laid out in a linear order making them appear as a set of discrete neatly laid out structures. However, Csikszentmihalyi argues that this, in fact, is not the case. When applied to practice these stages are non-linear and they '...overlap and recur several times before the process is completed' (1996:83). So while the table above aligns these processes as if they are linear, is it also possible to apply these creative stages to the film production process using a non-linear order. Here is an application of Wallas creative process theory against a six-minute film production occurring over seven weeks that sets out the stages outside the order Wallas initially described:

[Wallas's] theory can be applied to the broader timeline of the film production process, the finished script can be seen as illumination, pre production as incubation, production and post as preparation and finally the viewing of the film by the audience as the verification of the creation in its totality (Howlett, 2009 unpublished)

This interpretation confirms that it is possible to simply demonstrate the iterative and recursive nature of a creative activity. However, applying these creative stages, so literally, to a longer production, like the Fort Scratchley documentary time-line could become even complex and difficult to decipher. For example the Fort Scratchley timeline extended over four years⁴, and saw the delivery of two versions of both the online and the DVD documentaries. This was because the restoration of the fort was delayed for two years due to funding issues. The first version of the video documentary was screened to cast and crew on 22nd April, 2007. The next day the then Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced an additional \$4million to complete the restoration of the Fort making the first version of the documentary instantly redundant sending the producers back to the preparation and incubation stages. The second version of the video documentary was publically launched in July, 2008. It includes fort restoration footage and interviews conducted with the architect and building contractors. In this case it can be seen that the creative process for the Fort Scratchley project was cyclical, including thirty-five various shooting days, editing that took place intermittently across the four years of the project and the eventual collaboration of 'nineteen technical crew, twenty interviewees, and twelve institutions' (Kerrigan, 2008, p. 2).

Similarly, accurately mapping the production activities for the DVD and data-based documentaries to a four or five staged creative process, confirms that the documentary production process is indeed iterative and recursive. While it is able to be aligned with the creative staged processes (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 83; Wallas, 1976), I would suggest that it may be useful research to map these creative stages to a documentary production cycle. I believe this would also confirm what experienced documentary practitioner's already tacitly know, which is that documentary video/film production is cyclical, non-linear and repetitive and can't be neatly encapsulated in a set of linear stages.

There is, however, one component of the creative stages approach that should be discussed in more detail, that is, Bastick's two-staged creative process, and how that relates to the film-production process. The first stage of Bastick's process is 'intuition' which results when Wallas' first three stages of preparation, incubation and illumination are collapsed into one phase (Bastick, 1982, pp. 310-311). Bastick argues that it is only highly skilled practitioners who are able to collapse these three creative phases into one phase. While it may also be possible to argue that a more solitary or internalised domain, like writing or poetry, could justifiably collapse two or more production stages into one phase or even, collapse these into a repetitive cycle of phases it would be difficult to extend this argument to the technologically driven film-making process. Even for a highly skilled documentary practitioner, who may undertake all of the production phases themselves it would be a physical impossibility, given the constraints of filming, editing and distribution, for these production and post production phases to be collapsed into one intuitive phase (Petrie, 1991, p. 27). Nevertheless it is possible for an experienced practitioner to approach filming and editing in a particularly intuitive way, in-order to streamline their journey through a highly technical staged film-making process.

With this argument in mind then, it becomes possible to apply Bastick's theory to a documentary film-maker's creative 'experience' and further argue that a documentary practitioner's intuitive processes can be seen to be comparable to both the cultural production theory of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) and tacit knowledge theories (Polanyi, 1962, 1967). Both these practice related theories have developed arguments that demonstrate how practitioners draw on past knowledges through practice. It should be possible then, to draw together these practice related theories and apply them to a documentary practitioner's creative process.

Using myself, and the Fort Scratchley production context as the example, I will explain how my tacit knowledge developed through prior professional practice. When I began this project I had not made a documentary, but I was familiar with the documentary genre having worked, as a production assistant, on a number of factually based television series and documentaries. I also worked as a producer/writer/director on a number of children's television series for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC]. The internalisation of these experiences demonstrates that I possess a substantial body of tacit knowledge or intuition relating to editorial and technical areas of video and film production. Consequently, my personal background was impressive enough for those funding the Fort Scratchley project, Newcastle City Council and the University of Newcastle, to permit me to undertake the work. My personal background or my 'habitus', guided me through my own knowledge gaps. For example, also informing my decision making process were discussions with members of the field; This field included Fort Scratchley historical stakeholders and low-budget documentary practitioners. A quote from my reflective learning journal, a set of notes, ideas and reflections that was kept throughout the project, explains an element of my creative film-making process. This journal entry, written two years into the project, describes in detail the first idea for the documentary narrative.

If the fort is the protagonist then the antagonist could be identified in the military, and its use and abuse of the site. It makes sense to identify the Fort as the protagonist, as it is such a picturesque spot, and it's easy to like the fort. Its current state of disrepair is sad. In this sense the first act would be its current plight, I'd need to identify a central question, the second act would need to break up into two parallel stories; one to show refurbishment, the other to show how the fort developed originally, the third act of course needs to offer hope of what the refurbishment will bring, and what it will mean for Novacastrians and Australian's for a successful refurbishment. At this stage expositional stories could be developed around Scratchley, the man who designed the fort, the Russian invasion. The coming and goings of the guns need to be used to advantage. Obviously the climax to the Fort's story would have to be the exchange of fire with the Japanese. But for the fort it would be good to identify an ending to the story that would see the fort rejuvenated (Kerrigan, unpublished, April 30, 2006)⁵

The approach used here combines dramatic screenwriting techniques normally used to develop character, instead applied to the geographical location, technically making the Fort the central character of the documentary. This approach helped me to identify the drama and subsequently the story and conflict that had to be mediated through the documentary narratives. This detailed analysis of my creative process makes it easier to identify skills, knowledge and past practice that was significant for the creation of the Fort Scratchley production context and the documentary narratives, positioned as it was through my social and cultural interactions.

Given this evidence, I believe my individual creative process can be best explained through the systems model of creativity.

Figure 1, The Systems Model of Creativity

For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain, the variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 315)

At first glance, the systems model of creativity may appear too simplistic for it to be usefully applied to creative film-making practice. But in fact it is the simplicity that makes this model so robust.

Previous research, validating the systems model has been achieved through qualitative studies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and using practitioner centred research methodologies (E. McIntyre, 2006; McIntyre, 2003; P. McIntyre, 2006). Using the Fort Scratchley production context as an example, it is possible to map my practitioner experiences against the systems model. Beginning with the individual, my personal background, explained at some length above constitutes the variables that make up an individual's potential to act within the system. The field for the Fort Scratchley project is made up of all those who contributed to the production process; production crew, funding bodies, interviewee's and institutions that actively engage in critiquing the film-production process, and finally the domain provides access to cultural knowledge, comprising of all the intuitions that store knowledge specific to a project. Accessing the domain, in this case the body of

knowledge necessary to making a documentary, is something that is ongoing for all creative projects and it is certainly an important part of the creative documentary process.

On reflection however, I found that there were gaps in my knowledge which constrained the project and affected the quality of the two completed products. For example, my inexperience critiquing the documentary narrative proved to be an obvious weakness, as the post-production phase moved through to 'vision lock-off'⁶. Reflecting on this I realised that I possessed very little knowledge of the types of high order editorial skills offered by documentary executive producers. Neither were these skills present in the editorial team who were judging and reviewing the fine cut of the documentary. At the Australian Broadcasting Corporation I had been subjected to, and I had witnessed, this sort of scrutiny and critical feedback, which often helped to improve the clarity of the story that was being constructed as part of a program as it, moved through to vision-lock off.

While a process of editorial approval was in place for 'Using Fort Scratchley'; Fort Scratchley Historical Society members and Newcastle City Council representatives viewed the documentary. So too, final approval was sought from my PhD supervisors and history academics who had worked alongside me throughout the project. Unfortunately, it was our combined lack of experience, that is the whole film-making team's lack of experience in documentary film-making processes, which meant we were not skilled enough to critique the product in relation to its production context, in order to alter or restructure the narrative at the final stage of post-production. Unfortunately, within the University PhD Creative work environment, I found that the narrative was accepted without significant detailed critique. As a member of the Fort Scratchley field, and also one of the key personnel in the collaborative documentary production team, I felt that our combined lack of experience in shaping a documentary narrative turned out to be one of the most obvious creative limitations of the Fort Scratchley DVD and online products.

This gap in domain knowledge may have affected the broader success of the creative product, "Using Fort Scratchley". The narrative actually requires the viewer of the documentary to have an intimate knowledge of the geographical aspects of the fort. If this knowledge is not present in the viewer then the narrative could be a little confusing. These two products however are the first documentaries of the site to be assembled. Both documentaries have been well received by knowledgeable stakeholders and local media. The online versions "Fort Scratchley a Living History" has on average 100 users per month, with a total of 4840 users on the website over two years. Therefore it is unfortunate that "Using Fort Scratchley" has not yet secured a festival release or broadcast.

This explanation began in order to point out professional limitations or gaps in my own and the field's editorial knowledge that prevented me from producing a more streamlined documentary narrative. What it hasn't addressed, until now, is how the collaborative process of those involved also shaped the creative process. In fact it can be seen that group creativity is emerging as one of the factors that constrained but also enabled this project. A model of group creativity, can be used to more clearly illustrate how I, as an individual, functioned within the Fort Scratchley field and its production context. Group creativity research suggests that there are

three aspects of group functioning; group members, group processes, and group context. Group members bring resources to the group, and these resources determine the group's creative potential or what the group is able to accomplish (Paulus, 2003; 332).

For this project there were nineteen group members, made up of professional practitioners, historians and student volunteers working across both the DVD and online documentaries. As the model indicates each individual brings their accumulated knowledge and learning to the project, and individually they process knowledge of the project, and in doing so, provide contributions to the project. As indicated in the group creativity model all individual contributions are processed by the group through a shared social process.

Figure 2 A Generic Model of Group Creativity (Paulus, 2003, p. 334)

For the Fort Scratchley project these group processes occurred continually, throughout the film and website production stages of the project. Individuals' contribution to the process are either accepted by the group which leads to action or the contribution requires further work, and so the ideas cycle around, back through the individual, so that more work can be undertaken. When those ideas have been, once again, refined, they are offered up to the group where they may be accepted, thus allowing the ideas to be implemented. These group processes show how groups consider and filter all individual contributions as part of a social collaborative process.

As I had never produced/directed a documentary previously, I was not able to access, as a natural extension to my process, the ability to critically judge the documentary during the final stages of the post-production process. And because of the isolated nature of the project, done at an academic institution and without funding or editorial support from a screen-making body, it was difficult to bring in someone with the exact skills required to critique the documentary as it came closer to 'vision-lock off'. What was missing from the project, and it appears what was desperately required, was the kind of intuitive knowledge that a skilled executive producer may have brought to the project. Bastick argues 'insight and intuition are central to creativity and learning' (Bastick, 1982, p. 4), and while it is possible for the individual to intuitively compress the learning phases into one phase called intuition this type of internalised and intuitive processing can only occur for

highly skilled practitioners who understand the processes they are working within, because they have learnt and experienced those process many times. The whole post-production crew was experiencing and learning that part of the process together and often for the first time. None of us had any directly accessible documentary film-making intuition to draw on. Therefore, Bastick's theory provides a reasonable explanation for an analysis as to why this documentary production team may not have possessed the necessary skills to produce a broadcastable product.

In summing up, the examples discussed above demonstrate how these three creativity theories can be applied to documentary film-making practice. Projects, like the Fort Scratchley project, that have extended timelines and thus demonstrate the iterative and recursive creative process simultaneously demonstrate the ability and skill of a practitioner to collapse creative stages in order to manage the production process. This gives the practitioner, as stated in the definition for creativity above, their 'conditioned-agency'.

Therefore, Wallas, Csikszentmihalyi and Bastick's creative staged processes provide theoretical approaches, which explain the variables that contribute to the complexity of the staged process of creative film-making practice, however they are limited in application. The group creativity theory lays out this individual creative process as well as illustrating how individuals socially interact with others in order for a project to be accomplished. The group creativity theory is therefore, useful for explaining group processes. However, on closer inspection the group creativity model extrapolates elements of the system's model, but does so in a less balanced way. The preferred model, the one that seems to have the most supporting evidence at this stage, is Csikszentmihalyi's system's model. It appears to be the most appropriate when explaining the creativity embedded in the Fort Scratchley project because it demonstrates equity between the three necessary elements as well as demonstrating the non-linearity of the creative activity that is also known to be a predictable, circular and repetitive process, like a documentary production. When applied to creative documentary practice, the system's model demonstrates its versatility because it provides a way of explaining complex creative interactions that are individual, social and cultural and that occur over long periods of time.

Therefore it is possible to use these creativity theories to make sense of the variables and complexity of a documentary practitioner's production processes. However, further research needs to be done in refining these theories, in order to better explain the variables that affect the creative documentary practitioner's process.

¹ It should be stated that this paper is not contesting the validity of the information presented in the documentary theory, animation, video production, screen & scriptwriting, producing and directing texts that have been reviewed. It is, however, pointing out that these texts rarely define or explain creativity, in line with current research based theoretical perspectives on creativity.

²Cultural production research is emerging that is addressing some of the knowledge gaps that exist in this regard (de Jong, 2008). Cultural production research is of interest because Bourdieu's cultural production theories have been compared directly with Csikszentmihalyi's creativity theories (McIntyre, 2008a, p. 3).

³In poetry & literature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; E. McIntyre, 2006; Pope, 2005), performance (Pope, 2005; Sawyer, 2006), music (McIntyre, 2003, 2008a; Negus, 2004; Sawyer, 2006) fine arts (Becker, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Wolff, 1981) and theatre (Bailin, 1988).

⁴The project began in May 2004 and ended on 30th June 2008, with the launch of the completed DVD for public sale at Fort Scratchley's reopening ceremony.

⁵The information that I accessed from the domain was selective because it was influenced by my previous experience in the industry and my knowledge of historical documentaries formats.

⁶Vision lock-off, is one of the final phases of production where the images are critiqued and adjusted for the final time, and work can begin on finalising music, narration, special effects and colour grade, essentially the vision is locked in place and so the duration of all elements of vision from that time on are fixed, hence the term "vision lock-off".

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Biography

Susan Kerrigan is an academic and a practitioner based researcher in film and video production with the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia. Susan has been employed at the University of Newcastle as an academic, since 2003, and is also in the final phase of her PhD in Communication and Media Arts. The PhD comprised of two documentary creative works about the Fort Scratchley site, one is a 50 minute video/DVD the other is an online database www.fortscratchley.org). Susan's professional Television experience was with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (1987-2003) where she worked across a variety of film, video, multi-camera studio and multiple camera field productions.

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