The scholarly studio: developing a new aesthetic of the multi-camera television studio as an academic research tool

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential to develop live multi-camera screen production methods as a scholarly form of communication. Drawing on experimental work in broadcasting in the 1970s and early 1980s, exemplified by *The Journal of Bridget Hitler* (Saville 1981), and recent developments in multi-camera live-streaming online and to cinemas the paper asks if we might develop a novel screen production method as a tool to research, review and disseminate knowledge across a range of academic disciplines.

While single-camera production methods have long been used for experimentation by filmmakers and scholars, there has not been an equivalent exploration in form using multi-camera or 'live' television studio facilities, which have tended to be regarded as the site of more populist fare. While this may be due to the limitations of access and gate-keeping by broadcasters, over the past two decades television studios have been built as teaching facilities in a number of universities, in response to staff and student interest in industry-focused media production.

However, we have not seen the significant use of such facilities for research and experimentation. We need to return to the experimentation of directors such as Philip Saville, in the protected environment of the 1970s public service, to find an openness to non-naturalistic studio production and a hybrid form which might lend itself to academic enquiry. This paper considers some past examples of experimentation in multi-camera and live television studio techniques and forms, and questions why there has been so little attention paid to exploring the creative possibilities of the medium in recent years. It asks whether the shift to online and mobile platforms, combined with the technology of live-streaming and the trend towards 'live' and 'event'

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experiences, offers the opportunity for studio production to reach new audiences and deliver new understandings in the academy, beyond the constraints of mainstream broadcast media. It also posits an agenda for the construction and debate of a new aesthetic of the television studio applied within higher education, which might enhance the use of screen production in research-led learning environments.

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Introduction

Does a television studio look like a place of scholarly activity? What is the role of the academic amidst the shiny floors and glittering lights that we associate with the brevity of television news and the celebrity culture of entertainment? Can making a program in a television studio ever be a part of the considered scholarship we recognise as the role of the academic, which the acclaimed historian and television presenter Professor Mary Beard has described as to '...*make issues more complicated*' (Williams 2016)?

Beard intends us to understand that the world is often more complex than we are led to believe from the "common-sense" assumptions inherent in contemporary media that must reach out quickly to a broad audience. It is a useful starting point from which to grapple with the apparent gulf in forms of communication between a screen-dominated popular culture and the text-dependent ivory tower of academia. The academic process of "defamiliarization" hinted at in Beard's concern to "make issues more complicated", and underpinning Foucault's conception of "problematization" (Foucault 1997), is role-defining (Nicholls 2005). Yet the popular cultural associations of the media we use as academic screen practitioners might suggest they are not appropriate methods to communicate complexity.

In my own case as a television producer of multi-camera studio productions, it has led me to wonder whether the media form I am familiar with might be inherently incapable of expressing complexity or whether there might be ways in which the television studio might be re-conceptualised as a tool of scholarship as well as entertainment. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to reflect on my own journey from practitioner to academic and to consider the possibility of a new future for the television studio through its application in research using the concept Creative Academic Research Tool. I am going to suggest that a television studio might yet be considered a place of study, returning the word "studio" to its Italian origin[1], with all the potential that it might hold as a performative space with live content, shared experience, remote interactivity, distance learning and virtual environments.

Terms

The terms 'live', 'multi-camera' and 'studio' employed in this context, are not synonymous but are applied here, as elsewhere, in loose association to describe a common set of practices and technologies. They are not necessarily used together but can be differentiated from single-camera location film practice. For example, many multi-camera programs are not 'live' but recorded, or recorded 'as-live'. And while sound- and light-controlling studios are often the site of multi-camera operations, those operations might also be found in outside broadcasts such as sports events or music concerts. However, the common factor is that multi-camera production provides the opportunity for simultaneous editing of pictures derived from multiple cameras and other sources through a vision mixer, and simultaneous sound mixing of multiple sound sources through a sound mixing desk, obviating the need for extensive post-production (Singleton-Turner 2011). It is the combination of these scenarios—live transmission, multiple picture sources, and controlled studio space, combined with specific technology and production practices—that is of interest here.

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1 Etymology of the word "studio": studio (n.) 1819, "work-room of a sculptor or painter," usually one with windows to admit light from the sky, from Italian studio "room for study," from Latin studium (see study (v.)). Motion picture sense first recorded 1911; radio broadcasting sense 1922; television sense 1938. Studio apartment first recorded 1903.'. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=studio accessed 23/8/16

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An autoethnographic perspective: letting daylight in upon magic

Much of my industry career, and subsequent academic career, has been spent in television studios. This paper is an opportunity to present autoethnographically some of my reflections about my practice as a television program maker and then as an academic, and consider how we might take this practice forward into an era of beyond-textual scholarship.

Picture this: it is the summer of 1980, I was standing behind a camera on the floor of Studio 2 at Tyne Tees Television in the North of England and I was being well-paid to do something I would gladly have done for no pay. I was a trainee cameraman and I had just graduated from one of only two "media" degree courses in the country, called at that time "Communication Studies". The head of the camera department was highly suspicious of anyone with a degree. Although I had enjoyed theoretical debates about ideology and discourse as an undergraduate, I soon learned that the concepts that were common currency in academic circles had no meaning for the people making the programs day-in and day-out, in "the business". Instead, it became clear that survival in the television industry meant knowing how to mount a lens on a camera at the racecourse, fill in expense forms and, above all, how to get on with people. It was a privileged occupation, and it only became more attractive as I went on to become a researcher, director, producer, and executive producer over a twenty-year career, enjoying the fortuitous benevolence of monopolistic commercial and public service broadcasting to make thoughtful television: single plays by new writers; live discussion and arts programs; outside broadcast science programs; history programs (mixing archive film and studio interviews); and experimentation with the technology, such as making entire series using solely what we now call "green screen" to create a virtual world before that term had been invented.

I observed how the studio buildings themselves became a focus of regionally-located, collaborative industry and shared story-telling which went beyond their technical function: a site of factory production and industrial demarcation, specialized knowledge and craft skills, The connection between theatre and studio practice and the observance of rituals in these communal spaces, akin to the historical connection between the architecture of theatre and church, was not lost on me: to see the transmission of the nightly regional news magazine, *Northern Life*, as a shared celebration and performance of place, or to see the weekly network transmission of the live music program *The Tube* (1982-87) on Channel Four with its stage idols and adoring congregation, was to understand that studio spaces could become the site of a very different aesthetic from the constructed naturalism of the location film.

The opportunities to make idiosyncratic, innovative and imaginative programs gradually waned after the deregulation of broadcasting, instigated by the 1991 television franchise auction. Future generations will soon forget that this era of ideas-led, rather than ratings-driven, program-making ever existed, which is why research such as that undertaken by the University of Reading AHRC-funded project *Spaces of Television: Production, Site & Style* led by Professor Jonathan Bignell (Bignell 2014), is so important. Focusing on television studio drama, this project has reminded us of the extraordinary range of output being produced by the BBC and ITV between 1955 and 1994. The associated season of screenings held at the British Film Institute has revealed the extent of experimentation engendered by the confines of the studio and the liberation of imagination.

> Between 1964 and 1984 developing television technology, associated with the ingenuity of certain producers and directors, revolutionised what could be achieved in the studio. This season revisits that exciting 20 year period by showcasing a selection of productions – some unseen for nearly 50 years – that highlight the breadth of vision in the use of studio space and the creation of a new form unique to TV drama....Ironically, the limitations of the TV studio served to fuel the imaginative brilliance of dramatic production....This season demonstrates how the television studio was a site of intense dramatic performance, expressive mise-en-scène and extraordinary imagined worlds (Panos 2014, para. 4).

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Since that time, and following the start of Channel Four and its Film Four initiative in 1982, the demise of the single play on television, and the wholesale shift of single drama from television studio to location feature film resulted in the disappearance of a genre of multi-camera studio drama (other than soap opera and sitcom) and with it the opportunity for imagination, experimentation and new writing (Cooke 2003). The consequence has been that studio production is now confined to game shows, talent shows, chat shows and news and current affairs. Changes in the political economy of broadcasting and production over this time have been well documented (Hesmondhalgh 2012), but the demise of the television studios as physical spaces and technical facilities less well so. In recent years, as the new economy of multiplatform television has contracted from the regions, studios burdened by their unaffordable overheads have been demolished, giving way to more location-based, single-camera forms of production. The highest profile casualty has been the very symbolic closure of BBC Television Centre in 2013, when television presenter Esther Rantzen referred to the landmark studios as "a cathedral to the entertainment and news industry...It is a media cathedral. It is not just bricks and mortar" (Masters 2013).

While the "media cathedrals" have gone, I am going to suggest that we can learn from the aesthetic achievements of their multi-camera productions and incorporate aspects of their legacy into new forms of contemporary practice that are beginning to emerge, both inside and outside the academy, as a result of digital technology.

Now that I teach and research at a university, reviewing my career during this time has led me to reflect on how I might re-think the forms of television I became familiar with and view them as opportunities for experimentation in the academy. This has coincided with a growing unease that we should not simply be using our position as teachers of production practices to provide trainees for the industry which is no longer training its own to sustain its formulaic output, but to understand that part of our role is to be critical researchers and experimenters, and have confidence in the value of our tacit knowledge to the academy. The tension between the 'magic' of the embodied knowledge of practitioners and the systematic scientific method of the academy has been articulated elsewhere. In adopting the phrase of the Romantic poet John Keats as the title of his book, *Unweaving The Rainbow*, the scientist Richard Dawkins (1998) teases out the relationship between art and science by critiquing Keats' assertion that Newton "has destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow, by reducing it to the prismatic colours" (Keats cited Dawkins 1998, 39). Similarly, the art critic Mark Lawson borrows the nineteenth century essayist Walter Bagehot's phrase about the English Constitution (Bagehot 2001) to make the point that there is a risk in "letting daylight in upon magic" (Lawson 2006). In writing about artists speaking about their work, Lawson notes:

> *The case for silence is easy to make. Good art is ambiguous but good journalism has clarity, and these ambitions inevitably clash... (Lawson 2006).*

The common theme is that while the artist must shroud the truth of their message in silence and ambiguity, or risk losing the very thing that makes the art "work", by contrast the journalist must report clearly, and the empiricist-trained academic must catalogue and explain. In recent years, as the academy has drawn increasingly on practitioners in diverse fields to deliver learning and teaching, there has been a questioning of the boundaries around these activities and their differing approaches to knowledge. This has stimulated a growing body of work that has promoted the use of "performative" or creative practice as a research method that seeks novel and hybrid forms of understanding that challenge conceptualizations of knowledge. As Ingraham (2000) suggests, in the context of digital screen practice this "may have significant implications on the way in which scholarly argument is constructed" (Ingraham 2000, 1). Nelson (2006) has identified the implications of this for the academy as the "Practice as Research" agenda has developed over the past two decades:

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One of the major issues to have emerged from the investigation of PaR [Practice-as-Research] over the past five years, then, is whether practice-based arts research can be aligned with established research paradigms or whether, for the academy fully to embrace its outcomes, requires a shift in the conception of what constitutes research, and even what constitutes knowledge (Nelson 2006, 2).

This has been the context for the theorization of performative research as an underpinning framework for re-thinking academic screen practice, such as I am suggesting here.

Performative research

Drawing on Austin's (1962) interpretation of speech acts, Haseman (2006) has proposed performative research as a distinct research paradigm outside of the established quantitative/qualitative methodological frameworks. Haseman's conception of performative research acknowledges that symbolic data, such as that produced through creative screen practice, functions both as the research and the expression of the research. He notes that

Performative research represents a move which holds that practice is the principal research activity – rather than only the practice of performance – and sees the material outcomes of practice as all-important representations of research findings in their own right (Haseman 2006, 105).

This understanding has opened up a space within the academy where text might not be the privileged and prioritized form of expression, as Jones (2014) affirms:

'Any academic written texts reporting our efforts at arts-based research should be supporting ancillary documents to our productions, providing a trace, trail or map, not the other way round. Texts should certainly not be the final results or raison d'êtres of our investigative efforts (Jones 2014, para. 7).

The disjuncture between traditional text outputs and the "material outcomes of practice" of performative research presents a particular challenge, which Haseman has identified:

'As well as modifying existing research methods to create new ways of looking, interpreting and representing knowledge claims, performative researchers are inventing their own methods to probe the phenomena of practice. For example, one emerging method – known as an artistic audit – is explicitly designed to transform 'the literature review' into a more layered and rich analysis of the contexts of practice within which the performative researcher operates' (Haseman 2006, 106).

In the context of changing the media forms with which we operate in the academy, the drive towards a performative sensibility can be read as just the most recent articulation of a debate that has underpinned understandings of knowledge for more than two millennia, between the philosophical tradition that gives primacy to the closed codex and the rhetorical tradition that privileges expressive rhetoric. The conceptual framework that follows draws on this debate and underpins the discussion in this paper about the role and application of the television studio.

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The television studio as a rhetorical space

To understand the potential of the television studio as performative research tool, I have drawn on Lanham's (1995) call for a new appreciation of the role of rhetoric in education. Promoting the teaching of rhetoric within a humanistic discourse in higher education in the USA, Lanham identified the primary challenge facing researchers as a need to "understand the expressive environment of our time" (Lanham 1995,100). As Andrews (1996) notes, Lanham conveys an expectation that

> *rather than experiencing a complete return to an oral-based culture, the electronic media of our time reintroduce elements of oral culture into our consciousness and will fuse strangely with print literacy (Andrews 1996).*

Lanham (1995) says that electronic media presents the opportunity "to return us, that is, from a closed poetics to an open rhetoric" in which the digital screen "expresses the rhetorical tradition just as the codex book embodies the philosophical tradition" (Lanham 1995, 106). The distinction between the two traditions of rhetoric and philosophy is core to Lanham's perception that

> *'we now find ourselves in yet another rehearsal of this ancient quarrel between the philosophers and the rhetoricians. We pit sacred texts against topical ones, ultimately meaningful ones against ultimately meaningless ones, Plato against Socrates, finally - you can fill in the other contrasted pairs of proper names yourself - pitting Almighty God against what one eminent theorist has called 'the pleasures of the bottomless (Lanham 1995, 110).*

The threat to the academy posed by non-empirical uncertainties implicit in "the pleasures of the bottomless", which the rhetorical approach threatens, is indicated in the struggle for acceptance that Lanham's mission has faced, and we engage with as researchers and teachers of screen practice in an academy we find more comfortable with closed texts.

Since Lanham's initial conceptualization twenty years ago—which pre-dated the widespread adoption of smart phones, the internet, online video and social media—the return to orality, with its inherent rhetorical opportunities offered by the culture of the screen, has become even more evident. Lanham notes the potential for redressing the power relations in research and education that we have seen existing in traditional print-based academic discourse:

> *The criticism/creation dichotomy automatically becomes, in a digital world, a dynamic oscillation: you simply cannot be a critic without being in turn a creator. This oscillation prompts a new type of teaching in which intuitive skills and conceptual reasoning can reinforce one another directly (Lanham 1995, 107).*

The challenge for the academy is to bring the liberation implicit in the use of digital media in daily life into the realm of the more complex forms of understanding associated with scholarship. This echoes a much older preoccupation with orality and visuality in discourse that has lain dormant in an era dominated by the printed text, an era Sauerberg referred to as the "Gutenberg Parenthesis" (Sauerberg 2009). It is in this context that I suggest we can turn to the use of the renewed television studio as a place of study, and I will employ the concept of a Creative Academic Research Tool (CART), to pursue this idea further.

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The Creative Academic Research Tool (CART)

The idea of the Creative Academic Research Tool (CART) is my response to a perceived need to formalize, legitimize and curate creative and predominantly non-textual research outputs in a form that can be readily identified, archived, disseminated and cited within a research context. The CART lends itself to framing screen practice as a performative and critical device that embraces complexity and provides a way of articulating media production in a research context that does not rely on the printed text, but acknowledges the scholarly value of expressive screen media forms in their own right.

In this paper, I am considering how the live multi-camera studio environment might become such a tool. For example, a television studio production, tailored to the need, might be used to identify a problem, raise a question, review existing literature or other non-textual sources, acquire data through interviews, organize the data, interrogate and analyse the data through expert opinion, express contested points of view, perform the findings expressively through music, drama, dance and other creative arts, visualize the outcomes, suggest future directions of enquiry and provide on-screen referencing and citation. It can be a collective experience, with shared authorship, and can be contributed to remotely and interactively. It can be live, recorded, catalogued and archived and can be time-coded for reference and access. An appreciation of the expressive nature of research through creative practice is key to understanding the conceptualization of the CART. Forms of screen practice made possible by the multi-camera studio present an opportunity to reflexively acknowledge the authored creative and rhetorical nature of knowledge in contrast to the apparent transparency of closed academic texts. A CART could be a single item or portfolio of material (original moving image, archive images, written text, spoken word, still images, graphics and so forth), which is acknowledged as a creative artefact that has scholarly coherence and justification. The television studio is well placed as a locus and curatorial tool for this endeavour, facilitating productions in which the form which might act as a virtual envelope, containing a map or narrative of the research journey and the associated fragments collected along the way, a structure that supports rather than compromises the expressive quality of the created work, giving it the status of a contextualized and critiqued artefact.

The legacy and the future of reflective practice in the television studio

While reflective screen practice takes many shapes within the academy, incorporating, for example, documentary, scriptwriting, dance on film and experimental drama, very few include multi-camera studio techniques. And yet a studio, as the Spaces of Television project has shown, can be the most promising of spaces because it is like a blank sheet of paper, dark, silent and void, and thereby offers a direct line to imaginative representation. The work of two directors during the period of public service broadcasting in the UK highlight the potential.

The television director Don Taylor was a strong advocate of studio-based single plays. His autobiography Days of Vision (1990) reads as a manifesto for the multi-camera studio:

> *Television does not have to be cheap, depressing and second-rate. It is a beautiful, beautiful medium, capable of any-thing and everything the human imagination can conceive. It can be whatever we want it to be (Taylor 1990, 267).*

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By the early 1980s Taylor's work was beginning to explore the possibilities of reflective practice by incorporating devices, such as scripted studio discussion, into the drama he was producing. A notable example is *A Last Visitor for Mr. Hugh Peter* (Taylor 1981), a play about the life and death of a radical seventeenth century preacher and regicide. Taylor's innovation might provoke us to consider how performative expression and critical discussion might work together within an academically focused studio production that takes us beyond the naturalism we now associate with screen production.

In the same year, another production became a landmark example of a multi-camera single drama that offered reflective space within its production, Philip Saville's *The Journal of Bridget Hitler* (1981), based on the book by Beryl Bainbridge (1979) about a putative visit by Adolf Hitler to Liverpool in 1912 to stay with his half-brother. Saville applied a range of studio techniques to investigate Hitler's character, family and psychology.

Saville, whose other credits include celebrated single-camera location drama series such as *Boys from the Blackstuff* and *Life and Loves of a She Devil*, has acknowledged the value of the television studio as a cost-effective space in which to try out new ideas. He recalls the "operatic" and stylized aesthetic which he achieved in the studio to bring a non-naturalistic dimension to his work, for example by engaging well-known theatre designers of the time, such as David Myerscough-Jones, "Designers are not just creators of patterns or sets, they create a rhythm....I love things that are larger than life" (Saville 2016), reminding us that the rhetorical and expressive forms of performative communication can deliver insights which extend beyond the range of academic text.

Although the program is a scripted drama, it employs the tropes of investigation, studio discussion, archive, green screen, character self-reflection, character interrogation, stylized flashbacks, differing colour tones for the different time periods and conventional narrative to reflect on the complexity of truth and contradiction in history. As Panos (2014) reminds us, "The play's construction of Hitler is also put into question through the studio interrogation of Bridget whose account, we are reminded, is subjective and potentially unreliable" (Panos 2014, para 2).

Some of the action takes place off set in the studio, breaking the fourth wall, and some in the canteen while the crew and actors are at lunch, in what is arguably the most self-reflexive television drama ever produced. The result is an innovative example of performative research which engages on many levels. Cooke contends that

> The 'investigation' in The Journal of Bridget Hitler was as much an investigation into the creative potential of new video technology as it was an investigation into the claims contained within Bridget Hitler's journal in the fictional drama. Yet the mobilisation of this technology enabled the dramatic investigation to take place, rather than being merely a technical exercise (Cooke 2003, 135).

The techniques deployed by Saville lend themselves to the scenario already envisaged for the use of a studio as a creative academic research tool, incorporating the level of self-critical inflection required of a reflective academic investigation. This brief flowering of reflexive, poetic, and even operatic, program making—made possible by technical innovation and the institutional, political and economic circumstances of public service broadcasting—turned out to be the final throes of the single play in the multi-camera studio.

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These examples of experiments in the aesthetic of the television studio, however, now provide those of us working in universities with access to studios with an alternative model of production that might lend itself to openness, contradiction and complexity at a time when digital innovation can add interactive connection to new and global audiences via platforms beyond the confines of traditional broadcasting. For example, one emergent activity we can identify is the newly developing trend of live-streaming stage performances, often to communal venues such as cinemas, described by Barker (2013) as "livecasting". Livecasting of opera, theatre and ballet by satellite and online technology has become an opportunity to reconfigure the role of cinemas, attracting new audiences to the multi-camera live "presence" of the stage. Barker identifies a similar initiative of livecasting sports events to pubs and bars, with a comparative celebration of "being in the moment", and its attendant immediacy, risk, locality of place and specificity of audience all being a significant part of the aesthetic. The aesthetic of the form, however, remains one of conservatively transparent relay from the stage or sports stadium, in contrast to the hybridization that became evident in studio plays when television originally adapted the tropes of theatre to its studio environment.

Current livecasting makes surprisingly little use of the possibilities of social media, mobile media and online interaction that are now available. Whether this will continue to be the case remains to be seen: we may wonder at what point the National Theatre in the UK might develop a new form of "live film" through its *NT Live* initiative (http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk), or even build camera-specific stages for performance, or even multi-camera studios.

A second recent initiative that we might draw on in seeking the academic potential for the multi-camera studio is Harvard Business School's recent digital learning experiment, *HBX Live*, described as a virtual classroom for online participants (HBX, 2016). It can be thought of as a hybrid of lecture theatre and live multi-camera television studio, with interactive participation and virtual sets. The facility is termed a studio, not a lecture theatre, and although conceived as a pedagogic tool, it mimics aspects of the television studio, is located within a broadcast organization, and draws attention to the possibilities for shared global enquiry and learning which could be developed for research:

> With HBX Live, no matter where participants are located, they can log in concurrently and join real-time, case-based sessions with Harvard Business School faculty who teach from the HBX Live Studio, located in the Boston-based facility of public broadcaster WGBH. In the custom-designed studio, a high-resolution video wall mimics the amphitheater-style seating of an HBS classroom, with up to 60 participants displayed on individual screens...The result is a deeply immersive and engaging experience that allows participants from around the globe to interact in a highly kinetic way (HBX 2016, para 4).

Although limited in performative scope, perhaps in keeping with the subject discipline, this inspirational initiative points to a fusion of practices and environments and an exploitation of new technology that demonstrates a potential new direction in the academy.

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Conclusion

In the seemingly perverse, but academically necessary, mission to make our understanding of the world more complex, I have set out to indicate how we might make a hybrid learning environment in which to develop, express and share new forms of knowledge in an age of electronic rhetoric by drawing on the legacy of an older television aesthetic, combined with the potential of new technologies such as those employed by HBX. I have applied the notion of the television studio as an example of a Creative Academic Research Tool to help us understand how we might move from textual expression to screen practice as research and located this within a wider historical context of epistemological debate. I have anchored this within my own journey from producer to academic, which has suggested that the arrival of practitioners with tacit knowledge might make it possible to make the television studio look like a place of scholarly activity and a lecture theatre become a place of performative, screen-based investigation. Eventually the word "studio" might even be reclaimed as the term for a place of study. I plan to report on pilots of this practice in the future.

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