

The special place of fiction in creative practice research: a screenwriting approach

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Abstract

Creative practice research has become a staple of many university research cultures, and is core to the work of many members of the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association community. We know of its potential as a site of knowledge production and dissemination; we know of its fabric and guiding principles; and we know how to articulate it to others, such as in the form of accompanying research statements that distinguish it from professional (or commercial) practice. Little, however, has been written about the form that this type of research takes; specifically, why one might choose fiction over non-fiction to express, embody or otherwise perform research. In many ways, non-fiction screen works are straightforward to argue as research, usually because the research is explicit in its content. But what of fiction: of film, television and web drama screenplays set in imagined worlds?

In this paper I explore the special role that fiction plays in the academy when it comes to creative practice research. I draw on existing frameworks and my own experiences of writing research-led screenplays to discuss the ways in which creative practice screen researchers can use the tools of fiction storytelling to present ideas and findings in imaginative, innovative – and sometimes fun – ways that expand both our understanding of and encounters with scholarly debates.

Introduction

You can just imagine the scene.

1. Interior. Aeroplane. Night. 1.

A screenwriting practice PhD that explores ethnicity and marginalised voices has been submitted at a university in WA. The dissertation offers a comprehensive and rigorous discussion of how ethnic minorities have been portrayed on Australian screens to date, and the “gaps” in representation are discussed in terms of opportunity: the potential for a counter-representation, giving voice in quite a literal way.

EXAMINER A, en route to a prestigious conference in Hawaii, is expecting a documentary drama screenplay or similar that draws on an historical event or person to give context to the counter-representation being offered. But he is surprised when he reads the title of the screenplay – *Bronzed Zombies* – and what is clearly a high concept teen horror film set in the contemporary Gold Coast.

2. Interior. Café in Adelaide’s East End. Day. 2.

EXAMINER B opens up a package of PhD documents. The screenplay, *Bothering Heights*, is a ten-part sitcom set in a block of commission flats in Melbourne’s inner west. The dramatic stakes are high and the language is foul. The examiner is intrigued when she begins to read the abstract for the project: “This PhD draws on sociolinguistic analysis to argue for the importance of the semi-colon in post-Snapchat Australian vernacular”.

Though extreme examples of PhDs that will most probably never – though technically could – be undertaken, these fictionalised scenarios highlight the premise of this paper: that in our discussions of creative screen practice research, we often neglect to discuss the form, or genre, in which we work. Instead we are more concerned with defining and defending our methodologies, and worrying about the use of ‘I’ in the dissertation or exegesis. It is my intention – **the intention of this paper** – then to focus on this aspect of research, and by drawing on existing literature and my own creative practice research in screenwriting, celebrate the role that fiction – the imagined and infinite world – can play in the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge.

Fiction as methodology

In his article on creative-critical explorations in the classroom, Paul Williams celebrates the use of “fictional devices in order to explore issues that are traditionally articulated by conventional forms of critical analysis”, advocating the creative language and imagined content of fiction “as an alternative form of academic discourse to the conventional essay” (Williams 2013, 250). He points out how “the richness of fictional discourse compared to conventional literary criticism creates layers of complexity that mirror [the] subject matter” (Williams 2013, 253), hinting at the potential of fiction – with its infinite possibilities of style and material – not only to represent or perform research (see Haseman 2006), but also to engage readers in a conversation that highlights its various and nuanced aspects. Berry (2016) uses this method in her ethnographic study of smartphone camera users, in which she presents a series of fictionalised vignettes drawn from her data that not only mirror the “creative vernaculars” discovered of her users, but that also “enhance” the very practice of ethnography through combining observation with creative writing.

Narrative enquiry as a method (see Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Johns 2006) is well documented in areas such as education, social work and the medical professions, often as a way of ‘enhancing’ reflective practice (see Moon 2004). While there are clear similarities, fiction as methodology supposes the act of making fiction as central to the enquiry, with research serving and being served by it – hence, methodology not method. Fiction as a methodology aligns with Stroud’s (2008) argument that literary narrative (interpreted here as fiction) “holds the power to move individuals to thought, reflection, action, and belief” (Stroud 2008, 1), possessing as it does the cognitive qualities that allow for subjective perspectives to be experienced. In short, fictional narratives, through their various components and perspectives, enable ideas to be **shown** and **felt**, not merely **told**.

Baker (2013) discusses the potential of the script as a research artefact in the academy, drawing on narrative components such as form, structure and theme to test and disseminate ideas in innovative ways. In a follow-up article, Baker, Batty, Beattie and Davis lament that “scripts can and should be treated as research outcomes, and that scriptwriting itself, in the right context, can be seen as a legitimate and important research practice” (Baker et al. 2015, 8). Methodologically speaking, “in the right context” is important here because it signals the need for a fictional work to be doing research; to be serving and served by research as opposed to industry requirements, for example – unless the requirements of industry are the subject of the research enquiry. Fictional works from a research standpoint thus represent what Walter Benjamin argues for in his essay, *The Storyteller*:

it is in the nature of every real story to contain something useful; that in every case the storyteller is someone who has counsel for the reader; and that the purpose of storytelling, as it used to be, was the conveyance of something of value, of use, of wisdom (Benjamin 1970a, 86, cited by Nash 2014, 98).

For Nash, an Australian filmmaker and screenwriter of fictional, non-fictional and hybrid essayistic works, ideas – framed here as part of the research process – determine the way she works with material, being open and imaginative so that narrative components lead her practice: “Rather than following a predetermined shape, I try to let structure emerge out of the material and be a response to the ideas” (Nash 2014, 97). Speaking of fiction screenplays specifically, British screenwriter and academic Helen Jacey believes that not only do writers have something to say, they actually serve a crucial role in society’s representation of itself: “a first step screenwriters might usefully take is to define their authorial intentions and what might largely be termed as their ‘subjective value system’” (Jacey 2014, 241). Such a subjective value system, as portrayed through fictional means, functions to probe, explore, expose and test out propositions about the world (society, culture, politics, etc.) that encourage audiences to think. For Christopher Pullen, writing about queer screen practitioners who use the space of fiction to challenge norms and self-represent: “Whether directly or indirectly, screenwriters write about themselves; or at the very least, they frame their personal ideas, contexts and skills in the mediation of a narrative” (Pullen 2014, 285).

Direct links can be made here with the academic screenplay which, created and written under research conditions, also serves to probe, explore, expose and test out research questions or propositions (see Batty and Berry 2016; Batty et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2016). Functioning as ‘a vital incubator for risk taking, reflexivity and fearless critical thinking’ (Batty and Berry 2016, 182), the academy asks screenwriters undertaking creative practice research “to bring multidisciplinary perspectives and creative research strategies to bear on issues and possibilities, and often to think outside the existing boxes” (Cherry and Higgs 2011, 13). As a screenwriting practice academic myself, I question, pull apart, test and offer deeper and/or alternative modes of writing for the screen, considering aspects such as form, structure, theme, character and dialogue. Being in the academy requires me to position myself as researcher first and foremost (Knudsen 2016), thus I use screenwriting as a mode of research within a broader understanding of creative practice as a research methodology. The use of fiction within this methodology offers a way of **thinking through the screenplay**, where narrative components – however imagined and infinite – “do” the research.

The screenwriter as an intercessor of thought

Shaun Kimber uses the genre of horror as a lens through which to understand how critical approaches can inform creative practice (i.e., fiction screenplays), enhancing and moving the genre forward from derivative to innovative. Using theory “as a way of getting to the sinister heart of the story [you] want to tell” (Kimber 2014, 49), critical ideas are not additional but rather complementary to practice, enabling screenwriters to use the fictional worlds they create to both refer to and transgress horror histories. As Kimber argues:

‘horror storytelling is enriched through an alignment of a well-researched knowledge of horror industries and audiences, the creative application of craft skills and techniques, and the imaginative understanding of conceptual and theoretical approaches to horror’, which ultimately inspires horror screenwriters ‘to further re-animate horror storytelling through the creative blending of theory and practice’ (Kimber 2014, 61).

Drawing on a range of areas for creative-critical consideration, such as horror histories, paradigms, themes and industrial contexts, Kimber makes a compelling case for how “successful” fiction relies on good research, and that research can be made accessible and be of benefit to many when it is fictionalised. He writes:

Great horror storytelling, I want to argue, can be achieved through the linking of a well-researched knowledge of horror histories, industries and audiences, the creative application of craft skills and techniques, and the imaginative understanding of conceptual and theoretical approaches to horror (Kimber 2014, 46).

If “the creative intellect of horror screenwriters can be reanimated through the meaningful and constructive alignment of these intersecting practical and theoretical contexts” (Kimber 2014, 46), then for Nash (when writing about teaching Australian Film to undergraduate students) purposely seeking creative responses to theory allows powerful connections to be made between “learning” and “doing”. She explains how, like fiction’s ability to probe and question in creative and nuanced ways, students are asked to respond to topics in ways that can perform theory and, importantly, do so in ways that are authentic to the subject matter. She reports: “The results have been unprecedented in my experience as a teacher, the engagement of the students and the creativity of their responses both surprising and inspiring” (Nash 2014, 103).

This pedagogical approach is aligned with Nash’s own practice as a screenwriter and filmmaker, for whom “stepping into the unknown” and working from her instincts is very important during the script development stage. Nash explains how she learns new skills “on the job through getting [her] hands dirty rather than following the rule books” (Nash 2014, 97). Fictionalising her thoughts about and encounters with the subject matter, script development for Nash involves “reading, thinking, dreaming and debating with others; exploring the known world first and then heading out into the unknown to hunt and gather images, sounds and ideas” (Nash 2014, 97). Only then, she argues, can the “mysterious, alchemical process” start to occur, where “ideas that have been fermenting begin to take shape and express themselves cinematically” (Nash 2014, 97). From these descriptions of a very organic and dynamic process of script development, we might argue that the very form of fiction invites a prevailing sense of wonder and play into the research space.

Concerned with gender representations, stereotypes and their place in script development, Helen Jacey shares some of her experiences of working on screenplay projects that have piqued an interest in critical approaches to cast design. Writing on masculinity specifically, she is interested in how academic writing directed towards creative practice can “help screenwriters consider men from new critical angles, ones that can help them in their creation of male characters” (Jacey 2014, 238). Outlining various contemporary genre categorisations of stories that involve men’s relationships with one other, such as the bromance, Jacey brings theory and fiction together “in order to understand ways that screenwriters might approach male character development” (Jacey 2014, 238). Jacey is thus interested in how fiction can be used not merely to represent critical ideas, but moreover, as a form of transgression that can re-define ideas.

Using Macdonald’s (2010) concept of the screen idea work group to frame the collaborative practice of script development, Jacey specifically addresses the role of fiction in and for research when she writes:

My exploration here focuses on screenwriters’ active engagement with critical issues concerning male friendship in the bromance during the script development process and how writers might creatively manage possibilities and limitations for characterisation presented by assumptions around the genre (Jacey 2014, 239-40).

Asking, “what models might be utilised to serve character and story development in the bromance?” (Jacey 2014, 240), Jacey’s core argument – like that of Kimber – is that fiction can benefit from research in the way it challenges and empowers the screenwriter, and as a result, can offer new and important interpretations of culture to an audience.

Also concerned with gender, Marilyn Tofler discusses an approach to writing the satirical female voice she developed. Reflecting on her practice-based screenwriting PhD, which worked through and proposed “methods of screenwriting useful for the creation of social satire, featuring a female protagonist” (Tofler 2014, 256), Tofler explains how drawing on a rich history of satirical comedy theory and practice (e.g., a textual analysis of the film “*Something’s Gotta Give*” (Meyers 2003)) enabled her to produce and test practical tools and techniques for writing screenplays that embody “an implicit moral standard” (Frye 1957, cited by Tofler 2014, 267). In other words, fiction – in her case, a comedy feature film – was used as a way to develop and disseminate knowledge about gender and comedy.

Discussing queer voices on the screen, Pullen writes that despite historical denial of overt expressions of homosexuality, “screenwriters have involved themselves in the process of self-representation, evident in their screenplays and cultural disseminations”, which involves them “speaking to mainstream audiences about the context of their identity” and “involves a personal intimate subjectivity” (Pullen 2014, 271). Pullen makes reference to screenwriters and filmmakers Lisa Cholodenko, Tom Ford, Jonathan Harvey and Christopher Isherwood, and how through fiction they actively embed a homosexual identity in their practice, “constructing a modified future through personal narrative inventions” (Pullen 2014, 277). This notion of a modified future suggests a sort of creative activism, in which fiction, with its infinite possibilities and mass appeal, can highlight issues and provoke change.

Screenwriting as a creative practice thus offers the opportunity to present contemporary visions of identity’, activated by those involved in screen production in an attempt to ‘stimulate new opportunities for identification (Pullen 2014, 272).

As this literature shows, fiction occupies a special place in the academy and wider culture as a mode through which ideas and issues of various types can be highlighted, tested out and, with any luck, transgressed. Screenwriters, often working as individual agents in the larger continuum of screen production, are the intercessors of thought: they draw on research (of whatever type) as vital fuel for their narratives, and use screenplay craft to shape and deliver fictional stories that think and do.

The Fiction Screenplay

In this section I want to reflect on some of my own uses of fiction in research. Drawing from screenplays I have published in the creative writing scholarly journal, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, in special issues dedicated to scriptwriting and creative writing as research, I will outline some of the research influences of these works, and how I used fiction to interrogate them. The choice of these published works, rather than produced screen works I have participated in, is primarily because the screenplays can be accessed by those wishing to read them, and also because they were written and framed specifically as research artefacts within the Australian university system. Each screenplay was published with an accompanying research statement, articulating the background, contribution and significance of the work, as would be evident in a traditional research output such as a journal article.

Playing with structure

In relation to my experiences of teaching screenwriting and working with other writers to develop projects, I became interested in writing craft and process, and what it means to write an original fictional work based on knowledge and appreciation of the screenplay as a consequence of encountering produced works and “how to” screenwriting texts. In *Dirty Talk: Scriptwriting, Script Editing and the Creative Process* (Batty, 2015a) I adapted a script I had written for a web series – a series for which I also script edited four other writers’ scripts – into a short screenplay with three parallel threads: the script itself; the script being written; and the writer of the script playing the role of script editor on another writer’s script. This resulted in a structure that saw the protagonist (i.e. me) move between writing his script and, in his imagination, interacting with the content of the script. This included talking to the characters about their motivations, which resulted in them improvising lines that were then used in the actual script. Furthermore, by editing another writer’s script and discussing her work via Skype conversations and e-mail, the protagonist was able to find solutions to problems with his own script, her script, and the series as a whole. In short, this screenplay became a meta-work that used structural devices to explore and question what it means to write, and how encounters with the story itself (e.g. talking to characters) can represent the internal workings of a screenwriting practitioner.

In the screenplay we see the protagonist writing in a café; making notes in his apartment; text messaging the director of the project with ideas and concerns; and interrogating his characters as he tries to get to the emotional core of his scenes. The scene-to-scene transitions, which on the page help to navigate the parallel stories, encourage a deep engagement with the content of the screenplay, moving between the present and the future; between real and imagined scenarios.

Meeting characters

As an extension of my interest in meta-narratives that interrogate the craft of screenwriting practice, I decided to use the genre of television soap opera to test the limits of “good” and “bad” screenwriting. *The (Im)Perfect Screenplay: A Parody of Craft and Industry* (Batty, 2015b), was created to reveal the fundamental techniques required to write successfully for the genre. The abstract for the script read as such:

Drawing on the author’s twelve years of teaching, researching and writing about screenwriting craft, this screenplay draws attention to formulaic conventions and the industry in which they operate in the form of a parody of an episode of a hypothetical low-budget Australian soap opera. It is structured as a soap opera typically would be, with an episode containing parallel and tonally different storylines set in the context of a day, but deliberately exploits craft and convention to the extreme. Examples include starting scenes as late as possible, and also starting them ‘too early’; drawing attention to backstory but denying its exposition to take place; and contrasting high (and clichéd) drama with no drama at all. In the vein of Victoria Wood’s Acorn Antiques, a television sitcom that parodied 1980s British soap operas, The (Im)Perfect Screenplay: A Parody of Craft and Industry seeks more critically to reveal the hidden (to many) craft techniques of screenwriting by creating an explicit awareness of how they operate within a well-known genre and format. By doing so, the work offers simultaneously a perfect and an imperfect screenplay. It contributes to the field of screenwriting in the academy through the performative potential of the screenplay as a research artefact.

Character types and the melodramatic relationships they encounter became central to the work, as a lens through which to see, hear and feel “good” and “bad” screenwriting in action. Previously I have researched the soap opera form and through publications, have made connections between soap and reality television. This theoretical background allowed me to play in the creative practice space with ideas of character and form, and gain pleasure from creating characters that literally and figuratively spoke about the genre. As flagged in the abstract, examples of research-led practice in this work included: acknowledging the need for, but subsequently denying, character backstory; characters who come into and leave scenes either too early or too late, resulting in exchanges that simply “do not work”; and exaggerated, heightened use of dialogue to expose the vital soap practice of providing new and returning audiences with story exposition.

Using dialogue

“*Frankie Goes to Hollywood*” (Batty, 2013) is another parody screenplay, set in the world of reality television and built on the premise of mainstream broadcasters manipulating people and situations for the sake of “good entertainment”. To highlight these practices, the work uses the setting of a “quality” production company that is thrown into turmoil when executive producer Frankie returns from a trip to Hollywood, and desperately attempts to change her team from being ethical storytellers to “hack” producers who create high drama that will appeal to the masses.

Based on a book chapter I published about the use of character (as opposed to subject) in non-fiction screen texts, what became of interest to me as I developed the screenplay – alongside theories of story structure – was how the research I had undertaken for the chapter influenced my use of dialogue for characters and a general sense of story voice as written into the screen directions. On a general level, the overarching story voice attempts to reflect the intensity of the drama being espoused by Frankie. It has a dark tonal quality – corporate, tight, as if straight out of a screenwriting book – which enhances the ethically dubious practices of the television world being explored.

Examples include:

- Frankie glides past the grubby reception.
- Frankie, all teeth and tits, poses before waltzing in.
- Frankie heaves her bag onto the table and pulls out a raft of screenwriting books: McKee, Vogler, Field, etc.
- Frankie is even more animated now. The whiteboard has been filled with ideas: ‘Domestic abuse?’; ‘Plant cigarettes under kid’s bed!’; ‘Father = transvestite?’, etc.
- An ambulance arrives, followed by a horse and cart, followed by a mini-bus from a psychiatric hospital. (Batty 2013)

More specifically, quotations I used in the book chapter, from academics and reality television creators and producers, became the basis for particular lines of dialogue: the rhetoric of characters, Frankie in particular, hell bent on producing an award-winning show.

Examples include:

- Frankie: I want misfits – and lots of them! Bogans and bridezillas, all under one roof. Preferably one that’s leaking.
- Frankie: We hit them with conflict and character. No more of this, ‘Oh, aren’t they lovely people?’ garbage. From now on, drama, drama, drama. Tectonic plates clashing under the fault lines. (Beat.) Boys, we’re going to rock this nation to its core!
- Frankie: People go to school to be educated. And read newspapers to be informed. They turn on the TV to be *entertained*.
- Frankie: Then we slam into the kids coming home from school. Music lessons intercut with *Home and Away*. Theme tune to show the contrast. Beethoven’s 5th with ‘You know we belong together’.
- Frankie: We end with a marriage. Spouses from different families. (Beat.) Divorce with a capital ‘Holy shit!’ We do a one-hour special. (Batty 2013)

In stark contrast to other moments and characters in the screenplay, and in line with one character (Romeo) whose voice becomes more like Frankie’s after she employs him as her personal assistant, these examples of story voice and character dialogue can be understood as modes of practice that emerge specifically from research. They are narrative perspectives and verbal exchanges created on the basis of a broader critical enquiry.

Conclusion

As these examples begin to demonstrate, screenwriting practice research can benefit from a fictional methodology in the way that it re-imagines and re-defines knowledge in a form that represents its very DNA – narrative, story, theme, character, dialogue, etc.. Conceived creatively from the outset, a fictional approach to research has allowed me – and will hopefully do the same for others – to explore, question, test and probe ideas and concepts in fresh (and fun) ways. Fiction thus operates at both a functional and philosophical level: it does the job it needs to in a way that is recognisable (i.e. screenplay form), yet also responds creatively and with nuances to find ways of performing the research sitting at the core of its making (i.e. methodology). And, as the literature I have reviewed tells us, screenwriting practitioners use a variety of narrative devices to encourage their audiences to think, drawing on histories, social issues, cultural concerns, paradigms, tools and industry contexts. This is what is so special about creative practice research, if approached with confidence.

So for the examiner faced with *Bronzed Zombies*, it may be enlightening to see, hear and feel on the page – through character, theme and screen directions, for example – how marginalised voices can be counter-represented in a teen horror film. And for the examiner of *Bothering Heights*, seeing and imagining-hearing the semi-colon on the page, in the context of a fast-paced, foul language sitcom, might very well be the best way to demonstrate the researcher’s linguistic concerns.

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