

## Screen Production Research

“Cutting through the forest of discourse about *creative this* and *research that*, *artistic this* and *knowledge that*, Batty and Kerrigan’s new collection illuminates the crisscrossing paths leading to where two worlds meet: the worlds of film production and of the academy. It looks closely at the push-and-pull of thinking, seeing, writing; technology, art, poetics; truth and representation and performance; and suggests productive ways of being, doing and making, in an engagingly elegant sequence of essays.”

—Distinguished Professor Jen Webb, *University of Canberra, Australia*

“As the possibilities for practice-based research expand both within and outside the academy, this exciting new collection introduces us to a range of creative and industry-embedded approaches to screen production research. Batty and Kerrigan are themselves leading the way in these areas and their collection showcases a number of practices, texts and methods which will be invaluable and impactful for students and scholars alike.”

—Dr. Bridget Conor, *King’s College London, UK*

“A timely and relevant contribution to the debate within creative practice presented through a series of critical reflections on case studies that offer a valid series of alternative research methods to those more generally aligned to the social sciences; that screen production—and all that this term encompasses—is a form of research. Whilst unpacking the erstwhile troublesome definitions surrounding research practice, practice as research and practice led or based research the authors settle on articulating the value of screen production as creative practice research. All this is done within the context of the academy and perhaps specifically, current approaches to the assessment of research quality which dictate policy and funding. Focussing on data drawn from practitioner case studies rather than the metrics of the empiricists, what’s here provides a legitimate and equally robust alternative to traditional scientific measures of citations, bibliometrics, impact factor and ‘H-indices’ demonstrating that these are largely irrelevant tools for evaluating the value of screen production as research with its inherent ability to generate new and potentially transformative knowledge from data drawn from practice.”

—Professor Paul Egglestone, *University of Newcastle, Australia*

Craig Batty · Susan Kerrigan  
Editors

# Screen Production Research

Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry

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## FOREWORD: COGNITIVE TWO-STEPS

Universities are generators and purveyors of *knowledge*. It is their *raison d'être* and their currency, which means that unless academic employees are bound to tightly defined 'teaching-only' posts, they are obliged to be actively involved in the knowledge generation and transfer that are integral to research.

In my home base of Australia, the funding agency responsible for tertiary education defines 'research' with language that has all the elegance of a user's manual for a vacuum cleaner:

This definition of research is consistent with a broad notion of research and experimental development (R&D) as comprising of creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.

This definition of research encompasses pure and strategic basic research, applied research and experimental development. Applied research is original investigation undertaken to acquire new knowledge but directed towards a specific, practical aim or objective (including a client-driven purpose).<sup>1</sup>

After reading this chunk of verbiage three or four times, you get the idea. The ugly definition is serviceable enough. But I prefer the definition from New Zealand, not only for its cleaner prose but also for the greater emphasis it places on the experience of *understanding*:

**Research** is original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It typically involves enquiry of an experimental or critical nature driven by hypotheses or intellectual positions capable of rigorous assessment. It is an independent, creative, cumulative and often long-term activity conducted by people with specialist knowledge about the theories, methods and information concerning their field of enquiry. Its findings must be open to scrutiny and formal evaluation by others in the field, and this may be achieved through publication or public presentation. In some fields, the results of the investigation may be embodied in the form of an artistic work, design or performance.

Research includes contributions to the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines (e.g., dictionaries and scholarly editions). It also includes the experimental development of design or construction solutions, as well as investigation that leads to new or substantially improved materials, devices, products or processes.<sup>2</sup>

One of the qualities I like in this definition is the New Zealanders' strong validation of *understanding* as an outcome produced by researchers who use artistic practice as the engine of their investigations—filmmaker-researchers, for example. (I will offer more on this notion of understanding presently.)

But first let us appreciate a home truth: the work we do as filmmakers *in the academy* is pre-eminently the work of knowledge production rather than the work of film production. In our research ventures, the academy employs us to seek, generate and communicate fresh knowledge. We can, of course, make this fresh knowledge by making films. But there is almost always a hierarchy dictated by the academy: the films are a means; the knowledge is the end. And *the knowledge*, not the film itself, is the thing around which the institution conducts its calculus: how good is the knowledge, how readily identifiable, how full of impact, how significant, how 'weighty'?

What are the best ways to think, define and strategise about this process of making knowledge via filmmaking? How can we do all this without being in bad faith with both the academy and the specific, quick qualities of the cinematic medium itself? Audio-visual knowledge: how to envisage it, chase it, generate it, grasp it, communicate it, tally its impact and heft?

Such knowledge arises, I suggest, when the filmmaker-researcher experiences the immersed, messy routines of creativity oscillating with the distanced analytics of reflective critique and theorisation. Compiling their publication in both audio-visual formats and written text, the

creative researcher engages in a *cognitive two-step*, jinking rapidly back and forth between immersed investigation leading to inchoate understanding, on the one hand, and reflective knowing outside and after the event, on the other hand. To use anthropological terms, this means the researcher deliberately shuttles back and forth between the ‘emic’ and the ‘etic’ stances (i.e., between being a ‘participant observer’ and being a ‘detached scrutineer’) while appreciating the phenomenon under investigation. The cognitive two-step is most readily understood if we can first agree on definitions both of what it means to *know something* and of *creative practice*.

To know is to be in a state of having understood or comprehended something. Knowing—deriving from the Greek *gnosis*—is a state of being imbued with some illumination, blessed with the ability to see into a mystery, to dispel ignorance (which is the state of i-gnosis, the state of *not* knowing). Knowing is thus an after-effect of understanding.

Literally, understanding is the process of bringing oneself close to a particular quandary, to stand under or in proximity to a mystery, to come in from outside its radiation and influence. By coming in and standing under the mystery, by ceasing to be excluded from it, you can *comprehend* the phenomenon (‘com’—‘with’; ‘prendre’—to take); you can literally take *this* aspect in hand with *that*, you can combine yourself with the mystery till you and it imbue each other and you *know* it with a glowing, gnostic sense of the rightness of your having understood it.

Then you need to know what it is that you have come to know. You need to distill the principles of your knowledge momentarily, to reify them by extracting them from your tacit understanding before using them as a way to re-enter the experience with more focus and with better questions.

Note the message that comes through emphatically here: you need to step both outside and inside the mystery that you are using cinematic means to address. Not one without the other.

Research and creative practice can join effectively to make knowledge whenever their conjunction causes a shift away from ignorance or befuddlement. The shift can often take you to a new set of befuddlements, of course. Even so, it is *the shift in common sense* plus *the fresh ability to account for that shift* that ensures that the occurrence is *research*.

Of course, you can do research *for* creative projects, research *about* creative projects and research *through* creative projects. Mostly it is the latter process that concerns me here, with particular attention to creative

projects conducted as filmmaking research. Such filmmaking can investigate the affordances of its own medium, of course; but it can also be directed at probing, revealing and encompassing phenomena that can be ‘gathered’ via camera and microphone before being shaped, synthesised and communicated via dynamic screen displays and audio systems. The audio-visual ‘language’ can be deployed for investigation and knowledge transfer, just as the written language can. (I will offer more about this relationship between the audio-visual and the textual presently.)

Acknowledgement—a shift in knowledge within the consciousness of an inquirer—is instigated when the researching filmmaker conducts a productive and purposeful *experiment*. Etymologically, to experiment and to experience are closely related. Indeed, the French verb for ‘to experiment’ is *expérimenter*, which means ‘to venture into the world via aberration and risk’. With ‘peri’ so structural within it, the word ‘experiment’ is related to words such as ‘peripatetic’ and ‘peril’. The experimenter goes consciously and interrogatively into and then out of an experience, knowing it somewhat by immersion and then somewhat by exertion, extraction and reflection. Here is the oscillation, a two-step, encouraging the creative investigator to be both inside and outside. An experience is a dynamic and complex phenomenon that must be known through engagement with its organising tendencies and through attentiveness to the entropy and change also coursing through it. An experience is best understood experimentally therefore, through trial and error, through involved tampering and subsequent reflection, through a developing awareness of the actions and repercussions that are available and definitive inside and alongside the experience. Filmmakers, whether they label themselves documentarists or creators of fiction, know this two-step well. It is the routine they enact when trying to understand firstly what the film needs in order to account for the mysteries being filmed and edited, and secondly what the film is revealing to them about the phenomenon that they are trying to know better.

Anyone who has developed a film sequence on a set (be that set a fiction-production soundstage or some documentary zone in the actual world) is familiar with these accounts of experiment and changefulness. This is why so much of a filmmaker’s knowledge always makes sense first as an altered personal experience, as some inextricably *embodied* pattern of feelings on the move inside one’s consciousness, as a force of *mise-en-scène* that courses through the filmmaker as much as through the scene being portrayed, and as much as through the sequence of film

being assembled on set and cut together after the shoot. The know-how that can arise on the set is immersive and nervous, more implicit than explicit. But for all that, the on-set savvy is no less a form of knowledge than some other, more critically distanced mode of knowing. If you have spent time muddling on a set with cast and crew, you know the value of this embodied savviness, this sense of intuition, this sense of a delicate conviction in the bones.

The crucial next move is to draw that tacit and innate itch of understanding out in the open, where it can be proffered and critiqued amidst a community committed to enhancing the welter of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon being investigated with film. In my experience, there is an ‘arc’ of connected activities that, if followed assiduously, can guarantee that a filmed and edited venture counts as scholarly research. The arc has thirteen key moments that must occur in the following sequence:

1. Start with a hunch or an urge or some curiosity. It is good if you are thrilled about it. Refine this rightly fuzzy sense over a good amount of ‘mulling time’. Feel the allure of the mystery. The process quickly gets less blurry as you seek definitions, aims and focal zones in your curiosity, but you can validly start disoriented or even wonder-struck.
2. Identify precisely what you want to know or need to know—give language to this intrigue—so you can begin to satisfy the urge by composing and following a communicable plan.
3. Check (by means of in-depth investigation of existing knowledge) whether this identified intrigue is something the scholarly community wants or needs to know about. If yes, proceed; if no, revise.
4. Declare, out loud not only to yourself but also to others, the quest-for-knowledge that you are commencing.
5. Focus the quest with one or more questions (so that the questions will motivate and constrain the scope of the quest all the way through the rest of the research process).
6. Read and examine everything extant, everything already known *that is relevant to the quest*. This process shores up your foundation, takes you to the edges of the unknown, and gives you a firm footing for stepping into the mysteries.



7. Devise and declare your method for generating the information, the insights and revelations that will eventually be synthesised to form the knowledge that will fulfil the quest.
8. Generate the knowledge, using the method. This is an iterative, creative and cumulative and sometimes recursive and revisionary process.
9. Explicate that knowledge to yourself, especially if the knowledge is tacit or embodied and implicit, or if you just sense that you have some kind of ‘know-how’ that is not yet manifest knowledge. This explication can be evinced in an audio-visual format or in written text. It is preferable to use both, in separate but related utterances.
10. Get ready to communicate your freshly acquired knowledge explicitly, using evidence to back up your contentions, using written language as well as evidence within the audio-visual creation to show that some significant new knowledge or understanding has been attained and made explicit and communicable through the creative and practice-based activities as well as through the theoretical, historical and analytical processes that tend to rely more on verbal language published in textual form.
11. In a safe place, such as peer groups, departmental seminars and mentor conversations, test your arguments and your evidence in order to strengthen your claims to knowledge.
12. Complete the ‘knowledge transfer’ to the larger scholarly community via submission of the written thesis or the publication of a scholarly text along with the exhibition or screening of the creative work—and prepare for further dialogue.
13. Start a new investigation.

Thirteen stages make the arc arduous and complex. Between three and five stages would make the arc simple and saleable. But then *everyone* would be a researcher. And centuries of postgraduate programs within academies all attest that ‘breakthrough’ research is not meant to be easy. So, thirteen it is. And here is some more difficulty: if any of the thirteen phases is missing or occurs radically out of sequence, the researcher will meet strong scepticism about the *bona fides* of the project *as research*. This is because the researcher is obliged to account for her/his findings, to use words wrapping around evidence all calling to account the righteousness and usefulness of the knowledge that has been discovered, packaged and conveyed via the arc of research.

But realistically, how much of a filmmaker-researcher's energy should be expended on writing? Is the screening of the work not sufficient as knowledge transfer? Why do some academics (me included) insist that language—be it spoken or written—is presently a necessary mode in the robust and effective transfer of filmmaking-based knowledge? As well as espousing a two-step involving inside and outside stances in relation to the investigated phenomenon, why do so many academics (myself included) also insist on the value of another two-step, the filming and writing one?

My first answer stems from my recent experiences with government actuaries and on multi-disciplinary committees within the Australian research-monitoring system. Accounting for the dynamics—informal as well as formal, and policy-governed—of these powerful rule-making bodies, I think it is currently imprudent to ignore the prevailing real-politik. To say it plainly, I can report that most scientists and politicians are stunned and angered by artists' brusque assertions that no linguistic accounts need to be appended to the outcomes of their experimental processes. The scientists tend to offer a sincerely testy riposte: 'So, there's no need to write up our laboratory exercises—we should just invite people to visit the labs, and everyone will understand all the nuances of what's being discovered?' In the next breath, they usually say that it is in the struggle to synthesise lab data into verbal propositions and evidence-substantiated justifications that the crystalline and mind-changing concepts and arguments emerge. As one scientist said to me, 'First we need to learn how to manipulate *things*, then we have some chance of manipulating *concepts*; that's how we show what knowledge has been generated from everything we have learned to manipulate.' At which point I cannot see myself winning any argument about artists demanding some privileged exemption from the obligation to offer verbal disquisition and debate-based defence of their knowledge claims. There may come a time when a sizable portion of our society can sense and accept an artwork to be speaking directly and unambiguously to them in that particular artwork's own argot. Indeed most artist-researchers work to bring that time closer. But I feel obliged to say, respectfully and strategically, that now is not that time.

My second answer stems from my own experience as an artist-researcher. Thirty years of such toil persuades me that although an exhibition or screening might be an effective enough means of offering propositions to a small and stringently selected community of peers, there are undeniable benefits associated with the cognitive ordeal of translating

one's implicit, 'in-the-bones' knowledge from one set of semantic and affective structures (deeply embodied) over to a linguistic set (readily expounded). It is worth the effort, I am convinced by experience, to haul the implicit privacy of understanding out into the explicit publicity of verbal as well as audio-visual configurations of knowledge. This is because the explication coerces in the artist-researcher a series of cognitive shifts inside and outside the palpable and cerebral memories of the on-set and at-edit-bench experiences. In other words, the act of linguistic explication requires the artist-researcher to oscillate between seeking the insider's sense of experiment-adduced conviction on the one hand, and achieving the outsider's stance of critically distanced disquisition on the other hand, whereby the validity and efficacy of claimed knowledge can be challenged and endorsed in extensive discourse conducted in the open air of a scholarly community. The linguistic explication does not 'decode' the film work. Rather, the explication opens an arena for debate around the knowledge that has been synthesised and proffered both in the film work *and* in the linguistic account. Thus, by appending explicit oration to implicit know-how, artist-researchers can cobble a doubled consciousness that increases their purchase on the mysteries in the world.

Why am I so confident that it is a beneficial ordeal to produce a verbal disquisition on what gets learned within the ebbs, flows and pulses of artistically led research? The answer brings this foreword to its nub and therefore to its conclusion. The answer lies in the fact that artist-researchers (filmmakers included) typically investigate and give interpretive shape to dynamic circumstances. As they go about their work, filmmakers experiment with relationships unfurling in space and time amongst people and things and amongst the tendencies that galvanise the system under investigation. In doing so, they can generate and convey fresh knowledge about actions, repercussions, changefulness. Usually this knowledge is *felt* by the researcher before it can be espoused; usually it is tacit, unspoken, un-analysed when it first emerges.<sup>3</sup> Conducting experiments to bring change to the relationships amongst characters within unstable scenarios, filmmakers work in the midst of *complexity*, therefore catalysing mutability and making decisions about the best ways to find form within it. In experiments conducted in order to develop a work, the artist negotiates complex relationships of initiative and repercussion.

Meanwhile, in the world outside the artist-researcher's studio, complexity defines everyday experience evermore emphatically in our globalising economies. Given that most experts agree complexity can be

understood only by *experiencing it directly*, by imbibing and appreciating it from inside the systematics of its always-unfolding occurrence, it follows logically that artists are specialists in investigating, stage managing, portraying and understanding this major aspect of contemporary life.<sup>4</sup> In short, complexity needs to be understood by means of a special, doubled mentality, a means of being fully attentive both inside and outside the unfolding phenomena. And artists and filmmakers are potential leaders in research that probes and deploys this paradoxical capability.

Hence this book.

Canberra  
December 2017

Ross Gibson

## NOTES

1. Definition of ‘Research’—Australian Federal Department of Innovation, Industry, Science & Research (2011). URL citation: <http://www.uq.edu.au/research/research-management/research-definition>.
2. Definition of ‘Research’—New Zealand Tertiary Education Performance-Based Research Fund Working Group (2002). URL citation: [http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Research/Higher%20Research/College/The%20Performance%20Based%20Research%20Fund%20\(PBRF\)%20Definition%20of%20Research.pdf](http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Research/Higher%20Research/College/The%20Performance%20Based%20Research%20Fund%20(PBRF)%20Definition%20of%20Research.pdf).
3. This notion of tacit cognition was well espoused several decades ago by Michael Polanyi. See his *The Tacit Dimension*, New York: Anchor Books, 1967. See also his *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago University Press, 1958.
4. See especially, Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1998.

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