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Title	The methodology behind digital papers
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Publication date	2019-06-01
Original Citation	Gough-Brady, C. (2019) 'The methodology behind digital papers', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 17, pp. 179-187. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.12
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.17.12
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Download date	2026-11-02 08:06:20
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8227

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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 17, 2019, pp. 179–187
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.12

The Methodology behind Digital Papers

Catherine Gough-Brady

Abstract: *In 2015 Ross Gibson wrote about the need in the academy for "linguistic explication" of the artwork and creative process, in particular to encourage debate on knowledge that arises from the work. I began my creative practice PhD after spending twenty years as a successful documentary practitioner. When it was time to start writing about my research and the new knowledge, instead of using text I turned to the audiovisual medium as my method of communication. I created "Filming" (2017), which combines the theory-rich mode of academic papers with the audio-visual form of my art, documentary. I called it a "digital paper". The digital paper form has become an integral part of my PhD. This hybrid creative practice uses my artform medium as my method of communicating Gibson's "linguistic explication", rather than using text alone. This report will locate the digital paper within my PhD practice.*

In 2015, researcher and practitioner Ross Gibson wrote about the need in the academy for "linguistic explication" of the artwork and creative process, in particular to encourage debate on knowledge that arises from the artwork (7). Brad Haseman agrees that explication is needed but proposes that the artist may choose not to "translate the findings and understandings" into text and separate the explication from the medium of the art form (101). When I produced my first digital paper, I combined the explication with my art medium of documentary, creating what Margaret Somerville calls a "transgressive form" that is neither completely a traditional academic paper nor a commercial documentary (226). In this report, I explore the methodology that led me to create digital papers and compare them with video essays and essay films, and examine the nature of their form.

As a documentarian undertaking a creative practice PhD, my core skill is to convey fairly complex ideas to an audience who are often unaware of the debates raised, which commonly take form through linear and first-person narratives (e.g., interviews and observation). To do this, I initially conduct broad research and then whittle the ideas that will become thematic concerns of the documentary down, and find the key people whose characters will express those themes. Taking a similar approach, initially exploring widely before narrowing the focus, each chapter of my PhD is informed by research subquestions that interrogate the central theme of the documentary character from a specific angle, much like how an episode in a documentary series does.

My creative practice informs both my methodology and the way I communicate my research. The central research question of the PhD can be expressed using words alone, but as academics and practitioners Leo Berkeley, Martin Wood and Smiljana Glisovic wrote, film as a "means of communication has the potential to carry at one and the same time both explicit and implicit information" (14). The audiovisual experience adds to meaning in my research question, and takes the research question out of the purely abstract and intellectual into the "implicit". The

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film version of the research question is embodied in the interaction between the characters that appear on the screen.



Figure 1: Link to "Research Question" on *Vimeo*. Catherine Gough-Brady, PhD research.

Craig Batty and Marsha Berry wrote that the creative practice PhD is "a space of constellations and connections where practices, methods and understandings meet and shape new methodologies" (182). While my creative practice methodology is informed by my documentary practice, it also engages with the scholarly needs of academic research. My methodology "constellation" is primarily influenced by the work of three academic theorists and one industry practitioner: Brad Haseman, Margaret Somerville, Ross Gibson, and Amanda Palmer.

Brad Haseman, whose "A Manifesto for Performative Research" is a seminal text for creative-practice doctoral candidates, put forward the idea that a practice methodology is not just a sub-branch of qualitative methodology but is its own unique form of research:

> Performative research is derived from relativist ontology and celebrates multiple constructed realities. Its plurivocal potential operates through interpretative epistemologies where the knower and the known interact, shape and interpret the other. (7)

As a practitioner, I interpret this to mean that I can construct work and conduct research by accessing information and experiences from a variety of sources while acknowledging that I am doing so in a way that interacts with myself, the people I film, and the audience. Further, that my research process has an iterative structure where practice and research inform each other in the pursuit of new knowledge creation. Finally, that my epistemology is informed by my practitioner perspective.

Being a practitioner informs my attitude towards theory as well as practice. My understanding of the documentary form arises from my experience of the process of creating. Haseman posits that practitioners can work perpendicular to existing theories:

> Rather than contribute to the intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline, these research enterprises are concerned with the improvement of practice, and new epistemologies of practice distilled from the insider's understandings of action in context. (3)

The documentary epistemology attached to my practice informs my approach to ontology. As a creator, I see documentaries as emerging from, and a result of, relationships between people (and ideas). This has meant that I experience the documentary as a set of relationships (a process), rather than view it as an artefact that has been made (a product). My examination of the documentary form has been primarily focused on unpacking and reflecting upon those experiences.

Education methodology theorist Margaret Somerville developed a methodological theory called "postmodern emergence" where she proposed that "research writing necessarily opens her self to radical transformations, making spaces for existential doubts and uncertainties" (226). Somerville allows space for a diversity of influences to help shape the research she undertakes. She suggested: "The aim of these transgressive forms is to open up and disrupt taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world" (226). As I explore practice-led ways of defining the documentary, I find that academic research challenges my industry practice. For instance, when documentarians say, "do no harm", they are referring to the filmed subject (Aufderheide et al. 1). Until I started my PhD research, it had never occurred to me that we should apply this ethical idea to those behind the camera, including documentarians like myself. In "An Addictive Environment: New Zealand Film Production Workers' Subjective Experiences of Project-Based Labour", Lorraine Rowlands and Jocelyn Handy use addiction theory to explain why people repeatedly work in the film industry, given how destructive those creative relationships can be on the person. For instance, around the time I was reading this article, I was producing and directing a TV series for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (*Ethics Matters*, 2017) and an intern cancelled her participation at the last minute saying she was ill. I emailed her to say that it did not matter how sick she was, and that if she wanted to work in this industry she could never cancel. In my "mentoring" of the intern, I was maintaining a destructive work culture that had already taken its toll over the years on my own body. My tacit industry knowledge, one that is frequently unethical to myself and my coworkers, is made visible by examining it through the lens of academic research. The crew are no longer merely tools for the art creation, where all that matters in those relationships is that they produce the best possible final outcome; they are people who deserve respect.

These two forms of knowledge, industry and academic, can coexist and disrupt each other. Out of this disruption, a new hybrid knowledge emerges. The interplay of these two types of knowledge can be seen clearly in Ross Gibson's discussion on the dual nature of critical and experiential knowledges. Gibson proposes that "you need to step both outside and inside the mystery. Not one without the other" (4). For Gibson, a practitioner and researcher, part of the reason for this methodology is the need to explicate the complexities of the world around us in order that the practitioner/researcher might "generate an involved set of narratives that account for

the changes and encourage speculations about the endless dynamics of the system" (8–9). Gibson goes on to write: "Infiltrating the experience in this way you become not only a witnessing participant but also a diviner, someone who begins to distil some brittle definitions about the tendencies that are pushing through the system" (9). As a documentarian, I need to enter into the complex spaces that I film as my experience of them is a central part of my practice. And yet, I will always create a linear narrative and, in doing so, lose the complexity of the original experience. Unlike visual anthropologist David MacDougall, I do not regret the fact that I cannot represent all aspects of the complexity of the system within a linear documentary (28). On the contrary, I am fascinated by the task of finding a single path through the complex system, which, I suggest, is an integral part of creating the documentary character, something I will explore further in my PhD.

The idea of the creative disruption of two knowledge types can impact the methods of research communication as well as the research methods themselves. Gibson calls for an explication that "opens an arena for debate around the knowledge that has been synthesised and proffered both in the work and in the linguistic account" (7). This explication need not be in the form of text, and I have chosen to use the symbols of the audiovisual rather than "translate the findings and understandings of practice into the numbers (quantitative) and words (qualitative) preferred by traditional research paradigms" (Haseman 4). I have created audiovisual research works in the form of digital papers which can be seen as an example of Somerville's "transgressive forms" of knowledge (226). They are neither completely academic in the traditional sense nor solely a creative work designed for a general audience. They are also an example of the "bi-directional focus" that Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean raised when they wrote that, "as well as considering how creative practice can revolutionise academic research, we wish to ponder how academic research can impact positively on creative practice" (1). The initial decision to create these digital papers was inspired by the American singer and performance artist Amanda Palmer, who decided to use her art form as a preferred method of communication. In her music video "Gaga, Palmer, Madonna" (2009), Palmer explained how she initially wrote a long blog post to enter into a debate with her fans about the value of Lady Gaga's work but then deleted it. She said in her video: "Instead of writing a blog response to our discussion about Lady Gaga, I thought I would write a song" (0:18–0:23). She realised that she communicated most effectively using song writing, even when she wanted to engage directly in a debate about aspects of the music industry, which in academia would usually be asserted through written text. I, too, am interested in using my art form as a means of communication and see the documentary as a creative form that can easily contain explication utilising its aesthetic components to help convey academic meaning.

My first digital paper, "Filming" (2017), explored the social position of the documentary cameraperson. Because the digital paper contains explication, sometimes through audiovisual counterpoint but often via the use of voiceover, and is designed for an academic audience, there are stylistic differences between it and my commercial documentary work. These differences are important aspects to define the digital paper. For instance, I am neither seen nor heard in my documentary work because it is not explicitly about what I think. Instead, my authorship is subtly present through the choice of theme, shots, characters, and locations. In the digital paper, I am yet to find a way to include the theoretical analysis except by inserting myself explicitly into the film. The inclusion of the "author" and the hybridity of the form of the digital paper means that it can be seen as a type of essay film that includes explication.



Figure 2: Link to "Filming" (Catherine Gough-Brady, 2017) on *Screenworks*.

It is interesting to compare the digital paper with another emerging form in academia: the "video essay". Unlike the "essay film", which can be about a broad range of topics, the video essay describes works where the spectator/theorist analyses films using clips from those films. According to Erlend Lavik, the video essay exists "in order to enrich and expand the function of criticism". Using film as a medium of film criticism fulfils the need noted by film scholar Raymond Bellour for "the absolute material coincidence between language and language" (20). It makes sense to use the audiovisual medium to enter into scholarly debates about the audiovisual medium. At its best, the video essay could be a work like Kogonada's *What is Neorealism?* (2013), which examines the difference between the Italian and the Hollywood cuts of the same film—Vittorio De Sica's *Stazione Termini* (1953), re-edited by David O. Selznick and released as *Indiscretion*—and produces a theory about the nature of Neorealist shot choices. In its all too frequent lesser form, the video essay is seen primarily as a pedagogical tool to use in assessment or is created by academics who are not skilled filmmakers. The narrator of these films often uses the certainty of the authorial voice found in academic prose, and rarely allows for the subjective self to problematise.[1] This means that there is no internal character conflict to resolve, just certainty of purpose and a logical progression towards that purpose, where hurdles are minor and resolved and all intentions are made clear from the outset. The delights of narrative devices such as character arc, dramatic irony, or the interplay between image and sound are not utilised. These narrative devices are important because they establish a more complicated and rich relationship between the film and the audience. Film theorist Laura Rascaroli wrote: "The essayist does not pretend to discover truths to which he holds the key but allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator" (36). Like essay films and digital papers, the better video essays allow for knowledge to form in this "embodied spectator" space. While Kogonada's *What is Neorealism?* largely tells the viewer what to think, his *Way of Ozu* (2016) does the opposite by requiring the viewer to find the meaning. The film is open to multiple

congruent interpretations, with the viewer completing and resolving the work rather than becoming merely a receptacle for the knowledge.

Despite the similarities that can be found between the subject matter of a digital paper and a video essay (both are about filmmaking and often connect the form with scholarly debates), the critical difference is that in the digital paper I use my position as a creator to explore the very processes of creation. The creator theorist versus spectator theorist might seem like a small difference, but, as visual anthropologist David MacDougall pointed out, it is a chasm where the "filmmaker's response is in many ways the reverse of that of other viewers" (27). This is because for the spectator the film can "induce endless extrapolations from what is actually seen" (MacDougall 28), but for the filmmaker their "film is an extract from all the footage shot for it, and a reminder of all the events that produced it" (27). What concerns and interests a filmmaker tends to differ from the spectator's because of this diverse experience of the film. As keenly aware as I am of audience reception, this is only one part of the equation of making a film. In my case, these interests have included examining the social space occupied by the documentary cameraperson (in "Filming"), and the conflicting despair of the highly visible presenter and of the invisible director (in "Presenters", 2019). It has also influenced the way my films are constructed; I have access to rushes, I can look behind the finished product and see the mode of production, and I can shoot new material.



Figure 3: Link to "Presenters" (Catherine Gough-Brady, 2019) on *Screenworks*.

There are limits to what the digital paper can do compared to a written paper. Primarily this is due to the word count. In my digital paper "Presenters" there is room for 318 words in which to explore all the explication that I add to the film. This word length is closer to an abstract than a paper. But, as Dan Halliday said in "Presenters", those 318 words are not everything "because (a) you've got the interviewees talking, and (b) you've got a fair amount of imagery that […] saves

you a few words" (8:50). This returns full circle to Berkeley, Wood and Glisovic's idea, noted at the start of this report, that film contains "explicit and implicit information" (14). The implicit information adds to meaning and can create explication in that space occupied by the "embodied spectator" (36). Rather than exist separately as Gibson proposed, the explication and creative work coexist in a new transgressive form, as Somerville predicted. This means that the desire for absolute clarity favoured in traditional academic writing (the explicit) gives way to embracing a multitude of confluent interpretations (the implicit). This shifts epistemological concerns towards a place that is inclusive of the implicit, as Haseman anticipated.

To summarise, my PhD methodology not only informs but is also informed by the iterative nature of the interaction between research and practice, and by the way I combine both experiential and analytical knowledge. It also informs my desire to communicate research through creative practice. Using the audiovisual medium expands and changes the way I, and others, can communicate research, what we can communicate, and, I argue, may also influence the nature of the research.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Peta Murray for introducing me to Somerville's work; Liz Burke for introducing me to Gibson's work; and my supervisors at the time, Craig Batty and Leo Berkeley, for introducing me to Haseman's work.

Note

[1] Laura Rascaroli wrote about the essay film that it is "a field in which the author problematizes and questions not only her subject matter, but also her authorship and her subjectivity" (33).

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Suggested Citation

Gough-Brady, Catherine. "The Methodology behind Digital Papers." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, Crossing the Boundary: The Theory & Practice Dossier*, no. 17, 2019, pp. 179–187. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.12.

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