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Title	Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry, edited by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan
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Publication date	2019-06-01
Original Citation	Stoneman, R. (2019) 'Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry, edited by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 17, pp. 215-220. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.16
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.17.16
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Download date	2026-10-30 02:00:57
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8231



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 17, 2019, pp. 215–220
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.16

Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry, edited by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan. Springer, 2017, 253 pp.

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Published as *Screen Production Research*, the subtitle of Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan's edited collection, *Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry*, is perhaps a more apt and accurate category for many of the essays which start from specific film projects, although publishers are often concerned about the first key words of any title as apparently books are generally purchased as a result of Google searches nowadays.

The volume addresses the form and function of film-related, practice-based research in the tertiary institutions of Anglophone education systems at this time. The evolution of the phenomenon of practice-based doctoral research in many colleges has begun to open the highest level of formal academic degrees to the more unpredictable interaction between art work and written text. The general aspiration to settle practice-based work neatly into the defined parameters of research in higher education involves the subordination or suppression of aspects of the components of artistic practice that are less compatible with the strictures by which PhDs are traditionally produced and awarded.

The editors' Introduction refers to creative practice methodologies operating within an "entangled and contested yet innovative and empowering space" (4); "yet" is arguably the wrong hinge for this sentence as the innovation and empowerment is precisely linked to the entanglement and contestation. From my perspective, this flux and uncertainty should be welcomed as it challenges the rigid separation of discursive and institutional categories and the dominance of established forms of enunciation. New hybrid creative forms explore associative visual enquiry, personal stories, fictional construction and analytical incisions.

The prolonged instability and flux of the arrangements in this area, with a loosely, ill-defined mixture of practice and traditional scholarly writing, has led many academics of a conservative disposition to express exasperation and confusion leading to a demand for better designation and more precise measurement: What is the minimum length that a film or performance that forms part of a doctoral submission has to be? How big an exhibition of painting or sculpture? How do you measure public response? How many words for the written thesis?[1] Can external examiners propose changes to the submitted practice as well as the thesis? It is precisely because of the existence of wide variations in definition and execution of practice-based work between different universities and colleges of art that this relatively recent academic space offers more opportunities for innovation. University managements habitually impose numerical regimes to contain forms of thought that exceed or evade their well-ordered

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administration. It is important that the pluralist approaches of practitioners undertaking research should not be tied to severe or exacting and arbitrary rules, it is not helpful to bring them entirely under the instrumental management that many academic institutions habitually exercise. It has been said that many of these imposed systems are driven by a desire for consistency and fairness, a laudable enough motive for sure, but they can also lead to enforcing standardisation that is not appropriate to the activities involved.

We should welcome the way that artistic practice has inflected the concept of the PhD degree, perhaps playing a role in the academy not unlike a Trojan horse entering the besieged city at night, opening ossified institutions to a whole range of new—genuinely interdisciplinary—possibilities for research. The academy is familiar with practice-based research in other disciplines, including the role of experimental laboratory work in the natural science PhD, and this familiarity may even have allowed a fortuitous mis-recognition of creative art research degrees in some institutions. There are significant differences between PhDs in the arts/humanities and the natural sciences which are supervised much more closely and may be completed as part of a larger research project, often funded by industry with definite results already in place.[2]

The specificity of how the artist or filmmaker "thinks" raises complex questions which are effaced in the instrumental redeployment of the term "creative" to construct the category "creative industries", which allows art to fit into the entrepreneurial cultural economy of late capitalism. For this reason, artists undertaking research may not sit at all comfortably within standard research formats in a number of ways. Sooner or later they question the necessity for a written thesis, but it is a necessary component of a doctorate and, as Ross Gibson argues in his "Foreword: Cognitive Two-Steps", this is not just for strategic reasons to placate current university expectations or the art colleges which are now imitating them. It indicates the adjacent space for reflection and reflexivity that works constructively in conjunction with creative projects anyway. This is not the same as bolting some available theory onto pre-existent practice—Deleuze is too often deployed for this! Filmmakers as disparate as Bresson, Deren, Pasolini, Tarkovsky, Kiarostami as well as the extended praxis of Eisenstein, exemplify how productive these conjunctions can be. Theory which connects with the terms of creative practice can offer the freedom to construct the naivety and insubordination necessary to ask questions that undermine the basis of the existent symbolic and social orders that mutually reinforce one another. Its use should strive to open and not close debate, starting from the ingenuousness of actual curiosity, an exploration without predefined outcome, and not the fetishistic search for certitude, fixity and then academic validation.

But even if departures from the formulae of academic discourses can be made, they should begin with a starting point of writing with the first person pronoun. The way in which Roland Barthes, Jean-Luc Godard and Guy Debord all developed semi-autobiographical forms in their later writings returned a little bit of psychological affectivity into intellectual production and turned away from "*le petit délire scientifique*" (Barthes 178). Perhaps expressions of the individual subjectivity and selectivity involved in all research can work dialectically in conjunction with the ideas of investigation through group projects at the centre of the co-operative and enquiry-based learning of Célestin Freinet or the radical educational praxis developed by Paulo Freire?

Many of the chapters make references to "tacit" knowledge and the final essay by Belinda Middleweek and John Tulloch, "Afterword: Tacit Knowledge and Affect—Soft Ethnography and Shared Domains" addresses it directly. The domain of the tacit is variously

described as "embodied savviness", "embodied, sensory knowing", and "impulses, intuitions" (236)—which is not quite the same as structuring art around the forms of thought characteristic of the unconscious or the semi-deliberate and unresolved significations of the open text.

In fact, the book's afterword is a valuable exposition of the accounts that surround the production and reception of *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (*La vie d'Adèle*, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013). Rather than the self-described loose discipline transfer of "soft ethnography" it simply and usefully brings an exposition of the role of two lead actors Léa Seydoux and Adéle Exarchopoulos and the views of the creator of the original graphic novel, Julie Maroh, to bear on the understanding of the film and its circulation. It also *re*-places the individual filmmaker in the wider context of those involved in the fabrication of a film which is eventually marketed as self-expression of an auteur. But then an exercise of this sort is not so far from traditional Film (Cultural) Studies or at least its extension into Film (Production) Studies… An addendum will be needed to this chapter for the book's next edition as, in the context of #metoo, subsequent revelations of alleged sexual harassment by Abdellatif Kechiche were made public and legal investigation undertaken.[3]

Alongside the growth of practice-based doctorates in the arts in recent years the movement to include Production Studies within the broader spectrum of academic Film Studies has taken place relatively easily: conferences such as "New Directions in Film and Television Production Studies" and books like John Thornton Caldwell's *Production Culture* helped initiate the field.[4] The academic observation and analysis of production contexts and the belief systems of film and production workers has often been aided by the democratising impact of new technologies.

The publicity on the back of the volume assumes that the dominant and commercial modes of industrial production will be the object of study. Like the majority of nascent Production Studies, the unstated supposition is that film and television industries can link these areas of research with vocational/professional employment orientation. Only a few of the fourteen chapters examine examples of research which encompass artisanal or experimental work. This should surely be a significant part of the mix given the modest means of production available to most researchers. Furthermore, experimental play with image and sound combines theory and imaginative work in complex and unpredictable ways; in their contradictions they indicate the possibility of the achievement of new versions of praxis.

The academy, mostly run by persons who have never worked in private industry for a day, is liable to overcompensate by adopting and exaggerating the compelling discourses of commercialism, making arguments that practice-based research should be linked to industrial sponsorship, as though the industry that demands those skills is socially benevolent and neutral. They are keen to preach their gospel of employability, "entrepreneurial skills acquisition" and even "the ethical responsibility of universities to prepare students for the real world". The notion that intellectual enquiry and the development of wide-ranging critical skills, intrinsic curiosity and creativity is less of a priority should be refuted, especially at postgraduate and doctoral level.

"Industry-embedded approaches" to research often find it difficult to enunciate an explicit critique of the culture industry as part of a project of analysis within the dominant media. Historically the Glasgow University Media Group's *Bad News* was able to analyse the ideological bias of British television news production through a combination of direct observation of the production process (in the BBC and ITN newsrooms) and precise analysis

of the output. However the impact of that study and others subsequently confirmed the media's wariness and even hostility to academic and critical analysis. Researchers seeking access to mainstream media at this time would do well to ensure that their personal social media activities do not provide an indication of inappropriate attitudes!

The forms of independent filmmaking undertaken by many researchers offer an implicit or explicit critique of the industry as it is. In his chapter "Method in Madness: A Case Study in Practice Research Methods", Erik Knudsen writes of an approach to filmmaking and research in the face of a dominance of evidence-based method and the achievement of a low-budget fiction feature, *The Raven on the Jetty* (Erik Knudsen, 2015), work which exists precariously at the edge of mainstream production. Desmond Bell has produced creative documentaries and low-budget television fiction based on historical re-enactments and, in his pedagogical role, staged *Mind-the-Gap*, a one-day debate about practice-based research in April 2015 and a subsequent publication.[5] His essay here, "The Primacy of Practice: Establishing the Terms of Reference of Creative Practice and Media Research", uses diverse examples of image making: *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (William Kentridge 2016), *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975) and *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (*Zidane, un portrait du 21e siècle*, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, 2005–2006), to sketch the new research culture connecting it with the modernist avant-garde of a previous epoch.

Maybe the frank account of the wayward path taken by a self-described "naïve researcher" such as Smiljana Glisovic in "The Naïve Researcher Resisting Methodology: A Ph.D. Experience" is a good indication of the significant changes that may occur in a research project as it evolves en route, the work of "rebuilding a ship at sea" (Otto Neurath). Aparna Sharma's account of research and filmmaking in Assam, India takes documentary aesthetics as a critical and political field that responds and changes in a dynamic way as it is made ("Practices of Making as Forms of Knowledge: Creative Practice Research as a Mode of Documentary Making in Northeast India"). In "Peter Kennedy's *The Photographs' Story*: The Dialectical Image as research", John Hughes traces a history which places the meanings generated by a set of emotive and controversial news images filmed in Gaza and their subsequent use in *The Photographs' Story*, an exhibition by Peter Kennedy. He questions how art and "the poetic" is refashioned by research when it is appropriated into academia.

Ross Gibson makes reference to "knowledge transfer" in his foreword—raising the question of the nature and extent of individual/cultural/social change that may take place as a result of transformative knowledge, both within and without the available spaces in the academy (x). How far is "new knowledge" from "new meaning"? Gibson talks succinctly of a productive interaction of theory and creative practice, a filmmaker pulling focus from formal construction into detachment and reflection.

Perhaps one should apologise for raising the issue of the politics at all, but it seems like this is the elephant in the room. The connotations surrounding an overused word like "scholarship" can function too easily to protect academic activities from their political implications (Collini; Walker et al.). To state the obvious, a position and a purpose will emerge from what is researched and how it is approached, before we even get to the findings of the exploration. That position has a function in the *polis*, and is political. There may be a grave danger in confusing the advancement of knowledge with the advancement of the academic industry.

Notes

[1] Normally the thesis component should be approximately half the size of a traditional academic thesis (30–40,000 instead of 60–80,000 words at NUI Galway) in order to avoid the student working to complete what would effectively be a double doctorate.

[2] Practice-based work should also involve a supervisor with experience of filmmaking as part of any supervisory team.

[3] Paris' public prosecutor's office has opened an inquiry into an allegation made on 6 October by an unnamed 29-year-old actor, who accused Kechiche of assaulting her in June after a dinner at his flat in Paris (Pulver).

[4] "New Directions in Film and Television Production Studies" was held at the University of the West of England, Watershed, Bristol, 14–15 April 2015.

[5] I collaborated with Des Bell in the *Mind-The-Gap* conference held on 17 April 2015 in Dublin, cowriting the "Introduction" and "Coda" for the subsequent book of the same title.

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Suggested Citation

Stoneman, Rod. "*Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry*, edited by Maite Conde and Stephanie Dennison." Book Review. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, no. 17, 2019, pp. 215–220. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.16.

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