



RESEARCHING FILMMAKING PRACTICES

SUPPORTING RESEARCHERS TO REFLECT ON THEIR APPROACHES

RESEARCH INSIGHTS GAINED THROUGH, FOR AND ABOUT FILMMAKING ENSURE THE MAKING OF THE FILM, THAT IS THE FILMMAKING PRACTICE, IS CENTRAL TO THE RESEARCH ENQUIRY.

SUMMARY

'Filmmaking research' began as early as the 1950s with the creation of cinema and film studies. Research into industry filmmaking processes and filmmaking as an artistic practice emerged through the 1980s. The last decade has seen filmmaking practice establish itself as an important mode of research, alongside many other creative and professional practice disciplines. Filmmaking practice is now recognised as an approach to obtain new insights through filmmaking, for filmmaking and about filmmaking. Practice methodologies are used to design filmmaking research and this case study profiles films, their practice methodologies and their research contributions.

Filmmaking researchers conceive films with the intention that their production and dissemination will answer specific research questions. Filmmaking research is neither research as ipso facto, nor a posteriori; as claims that a film is research cannot be made after the film is completed. Hence it is critical that the research questions and choices of methodology, which describe the research approach and design, are clearly explained at the beginning of both the research and filmmaking processes as they frame new knowledge that comes through the making of the film.

Filmmakers devise specific questions about their own practice, or the practice of filmmaking more generally, and use the making of a film to answer these questions. The research emphasis might be on how a story is realised for the screen, working with and managing stakeholders including organisations, on and off camera participants and audiences.

Filmmaking research aims to reveal the complexities of a filmmaker's environment, which might include research about a project's production contexts, stories and narratives, screen cultures, participants, logistics, budget as well as the filmmakers' experiences and collaborations when making a film. New knowledge about filmmaking is acquired for filmmaking through filmmaking. Research about filmmaking is what underpins this mode to make a research project, not just creative practice or industry filmmaking.

FILMMAKERS IN THE ACADEMY

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'?

(Gibson in Batty and Kerrigan, 2017, p. vi)

FILMMAKING RESEARCH VERSUS INDUSTRY FILMMAKING

Most filmmaking academics have had industry careers, and industry terms and practices are used in their pedagogies and their research but it would be naive to suggest that industry filmmaking is filmmaking research. It is not. Filmmaking research and industry filmmaking serve different purposes, and this can be appreciated when looking at how a research film is made. Here are some examples:

RESEARCH FILMS MADE BY INDUSTRY

An academic researcher may commission a production company to make a film based on their research. An example of this is *Message from Mungo* (2014) where Ann McGrath, Professor of History at the Australian National University, completed research into histories of place and made a film which documents an indigenous community and their interface with scientists over the human remains on Mungo, an aboriginal site. Ronin Films was the Australian production company and Andrew Pike co-directed the film with McGrath. *Message from Mungo* is a research film because its purpose was to disseminate historical research findings to the broader community so that it will have impact. Research films, like this, may be made by educational, commercial or third sector production companies and fall into the category of interdisciplinary films as the film's narrative explains existing research findings. The production company will most probably use established filmmaking techniques which means their contribution to new knowledge about filmmaking will probably be quite limited. The film is a research film because it disseminates new knowledge based on prior research.

RESEARCH FILMS MADE BY FILMMAKING ACADEMICS

An academic researcher may work with an academic filmmaker to make a film. The film *Stem Cell Revolutions* (2011) is a collaboration between a documentary filmmaker from the academy and a professor of Regenerative Medicine, which brings together filmmaker and scientist, to engage diverse audiences with the evolution of stem cell research. *Stem Cell Revolutions* is an example of an interdisciplinary film, where the content of the film is informed by research which then leads to impact through the making of the film and its dissemination. Films like this meet the filmmaking research criteria and therefore they are examples of both filmmaking research and research films that disseminate new knowledge based on prior research.

RESEARCH FILMS MADE BY FILMMAKING PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHERS

Filmmaking researchers create projects that allow them to gain insights about culturally and socially topical issues, as well as developing new knowledge about specialist filmmaking practices. An example of this is in the film *The Crossing* (2017), by Shreepali Patel and StoryLab, Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin University, where the filmmakers investigate the exploitation of hope and the black-market economy of human trafficking through an emotionally heightened multi-screen work.

The filmmaking practice sits at the centre of the research and as such leads to research insights gained through, for and about filmmaking. Allowing a filmmaker to gather new knowledge through and for filmmaking advances understanding and knowledge about filmmaking creativity through narratives, production, collaboration, processes and practices.

The types of new knowledge that come from filmmaking research can be culturally and socially beneficial while also providing opportunities for specialist filmmakers to reflect on story telling practices. For example, how a film's content is treated, how the narrative is created or how the technology and the crew are deployed to realise that narrative are possible approaches to filmmaking practice research. A methodology describes the research design used to gather new knowledge for any research activity whereas research methods describe how that knowledge was acquired. Methodologies and research methods are frequently conflated but have different purposes and they are not synonymous.

Practice methodologies are one of the academic identifiers that differentiate research from industry practice. Without a research question, or a methodology, no film can truly claim to contain academic research. Much like all surveys, or all experiments are not necessarily research, all films do not equate to academic research.

Filmmaking practice researchers carry out unique enquiries, they are motivated by different aims from those making a research film with industry. A non-academic production company may make a research film using academic research as the content for the film, but without academic research protocols in place at the inception of the film, it is unlikely that the filmmaking practice can be claimed as research. At the moment this is a contested space which is why more work needs to be done to identify broader trends and developments surrounding filmmaking research.

The choice around which practice methodology to use, and which combination of methods is the most appropriate for the filmmaking enquiry will depend entirely on the researcher's position as a filmmaker and what question/s they hope to answer by doing research through, for or about filmmaking.

QUALITATIVE AND PRACTICE RESEARCH ARE INTERTWINED

Qualitative research looks at the quality, condition or nature of the objects of study. Film and Screen Studies have traditionally used qualitative research techniques to conduct research about how films impact the wider world. This type of research can be focused on screen cultures, which include an audience's reception of the film or how the film reflects cultural activities and contemporary points of view. Film and Screen Studies use qualitative methods like case studies, surveys and interviews to conduct this type of research and in the last decades practice research has emerged allowing filmmakers to research what they do from a position inside the filmmaking process.

Research undertaken from a practitioner's point of view moves beyond qualitative research paradigms because it takes an insider's approach to researching their practice. Practice research is generally conducted by one person, it is a singular pursuit, though not exclusively. It is used across many areas of artistic, creative and/or professional practice. Nevertheless, it is still closely aligned with, and draws on many of the features used in qualitative research. For example, ethnography, auto-ethnography and the case study can be used for both practice and qualitative research projects.

Production Studies is an example of an approach where qualitative and practice research have been used to describe feature film production models, particularly those of Hollywood. Some Production Studies researchers are filmmakers who have focused research questions on their filmmaking practices, and thus combined qualitative and practice methodologies.

Understanding the differences between qualitative and practice methodologies will help filmmakers conduct research enquiries that are better able to describe the knowledge contributions that arise from their perspective of, and positions in, film production.

Acquiring new knowledge from a filmmaking practice perspective builds integrity and rigour about filmmaking as a mode of research, and moves it towards more accurate methodological descriptors, where the making of the film sits at the heart of the research enquiry. Allowing filmmakers to gather new knowledge about filmmaking, conducted through and for filmmaking, advances understandings and knowledge around film and screen cultures, audiences, productions, genres and creative processes.

Practice research methodologies validate the gathering of new knowledge from the filmmakers' insider position. Defined by Smith and Dean as Practice as Research (PaR), practice-led research, practice-based research, research-led practice and creative practice research, these following examples demonstrate how the filmmaking can be a way of undertaking research.

DEFINING PRACTICE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

Practice as Research known as PaR is where practice is used as the primary method of enquiry and the results of any practice provide evidence of that enquiry. Robin Nelson, among others, provides insights into this definition and also notes that PaR does not require the use of a theory to justify the practice; rather, its strength is the undertaking of the practice, be that filmmaking, visual arts, dance, creative writing etc.

FILM PROFILE PRACTICE AS RESEARCH (PaR)

ARMAGH STORIES: VOICES FROM THE GAOL

Filmmaker: Cahal McLaughlin
(producer/director)

Format: Documentary

Duration: 58"

Budget: £51,000

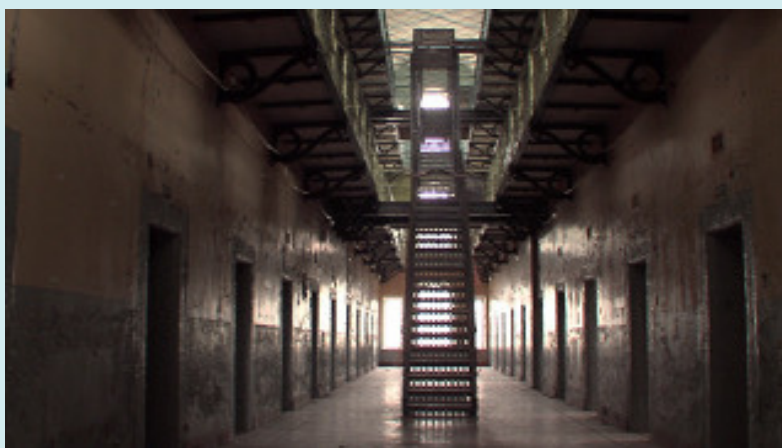
Published: 2015

Earlier Project: 'Unseen Women' at
www.goo.gl/ZCzLqB

Screened: Universities of Sydney, Notre Dame, Sao Paolo, La Rioja, Galway, Foyle Film Festivals. Northern Ireland community group screenings (some open, some closed) throughout Belfast.

Brief Synopsis: Site specific memories of those who passed through the female prison during the Northern Irish Troubles.

Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol (2015), is a PaR exemplar where documentary practice was used as a key research method that allowed an enquiry through the filmmaking processes of



production, post-production and exhibition which created unique co-ownership protocols where the filmmaker and the documentary interviewees co-constructed the narrative.

Cahal McLaughlin was joined by other academics working as production manager, sound recordist and editor. The PaR's methodology is detailed in the 2017 publication 'Memory, place and gender: Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol', that describes McLaughlin's intent as a documentary filmmaker researching the filmmaking protocols of co-ownership, inclusivity, life-storytelling through making a documentary narrative. All interviewees signed a co-ownership agreement at the time of recording and the film, as a medium, engages with the memories of the interviewees in relation to the site of the experiences. During post-production the participants were consulted and commented on rough cuts at each stage of editing.

PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH

Practice-led research means the practice that the filmmaker reflects on during the production process and after, which leads to new understandings about practice. Practice-led research occurs through process of shaping an artwork, alongside reflection of that practice.

FILM PROFILE - PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH

ORCHIDS: MY INTERSEX ADVENTURE

Filmmaker: Phoebe Hart

Format: Documentary

Duration: 60"

Budget: AU\$170,000/£98,000 (ABC, Screen Australia and Screen Queensland, Queensland University of Technology)

Production Company: Hartflicker Moving Pictures

View the Film: Kanopy

Screened: 2010 premiere at the Brisbane International Film Festival. Won 21 awards including Best Documentary, Best Film by Popular Vote. Phoebe Hart was awarded Best Direction in a Documentary (Stand Alone) at the 2012 Australian Directors Guild Awards.

Short Synopsis: The film follows documentary filmmaker, Phoebe Hart, as she comes clean on her journey of self-discovery to embrace her future and reconcile the past shame and family secrecy surrounding her intersex condition.

Orchids: My Intersex Adventure is a practice-led research exemplar where performative, auto/biographical filmmaking led to research insights about the filmmaker's personal truth and her lived experience as someone who has an intersex condition. The film was shot on digital cameras by a small crew, who were insiders to the intersex community. Hart argues that "by having a small, 'insider' crew, the 'talent' was more inclined to openly express issues that may have been long shrouded in secrecy and stigma". This created a transformative research context that empowered the sharing of stories between the filmmakers working behind the scenes with on-camera participants. Critical theory and dialogic/dialectic methodologies were also used to take the filmmaking research into feminist and queer theory paradigms. This illustrates the blurring of boundaries between qualitative and practice research methodologies.



PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

Practice-based research is where the creative work is the result of research. In other words, the film is the basis of the contribution to knowledge because of the knowledge that the film contains; and in some specific context the practice and the research cannot be separated.

FILM PROFILE - PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

COLOURS OF THE ALPHABET



Filmmakers: Alastair Cole (Director, Co-Editor). Nick Higgins (Producer)

Format: Documentary

Duration: 80"

Language: Nyanja, Soli, Bemba, English

Budget: £75,000 (£50,000 external, and £25,000 university)

Production Company: Tongue Tied Films (www.tonguetiedfilms.co.uk);
Lansdowne Productions (www.lansdowneproductions.co.uk)

Film Website: www.coloursofthealphabet.com

View Film Trailer: www.coloursofthealphabet.com/watch-online

Screened: Glasgow Film Festival 2016 Glasgow (Official Selection), UK Cinema Release 2016 in 9 Cinemas and over 20 International Film Festival screenings. In 2018 it will be released as a multilingual broadcast across 49 countries in Africa.

Short Synopsis: An inspiring, bittersweet film on language and childhood, following three Zambian children and their families over their first year of school, and asking: Does the future have to be in English?

Colours of the Alphabet is a documentary film, as a creative artefact it is an exemplar of practice-based research where observational documentary, also known as visual ethnography, was used as a research tool to investigate multilingual education in Zambia.

Drawing on qualitative approaches, filmmaking was used as a research method and the final film provides the first known audio-visual recording of the Soli language in a community setting, as well as providing an exemplar for the representation of multilingual environments on film through multicoloured subtitles. In the film, Soli speaking students are observed in the classroom having to learn through the regional language of Nyanja, while having to learn English, which is Zambia's only official language, and sole language of education from grade five onwards. Interviews with teachers and parents further illustrate the multilingual context of this rural education. As a result, the final film provides an example of the implications of non-mother tongue primary education for the students, parents and teachers.

ADVANCING DEBATES ABOUT PRACTICE METHODOLOGIES

The film profiles presented here suggest that the difference between these practice methodologies is nuanced, and what is most useful are the insights and new knowledge gained through the filmmaking research. Although in order to conduct filmmaking research a filmmaking researcher must be able to describe a research question and their methodology because it is critical in differentiating the filmmaking research from industry practice.

Some of the once important distinctions between these three practice research approaches appear to be much less obvious when looking at research outcomes, one has to ask “How useful are these generic practice methodologies when conducting filmmaking research?”.

These practice descriptors have been in place for more than two decades and perhaps they should be updated now there is a body of filmmaking practice research that can be critically reflected on. Researchers in other disciplines frequently adapt existing methodologies, they re-name and re-work them, so they are more appropriate to a discipline and can accommodate new ways of doing things and new understandings.

Research approaches used for filmmaking practice mature naturally so an apt descriptor can emerge. Screen Production Enquiry, for example, is an emerging methodology from Australia. Its focus is on screen production/filmmaking practices that allow filmmaking to be used as a research method. There may be other practice methodologies that can help advance these disciplinary debates, to eliminate the need to select one methodological descriptor over another, so that it is possible to consolidate the activity of research *through, for and about* filmmaking practice.

LIMITATIONS OF PRACTICE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

- Practice research methodologies can be generic and may result in generalisations about practice that do not advance filmmaking knowledge.
- Practice research has frequently been critiqued for being too subjective. Ways to defend this are to use a combination of research methods to support researchers’ knowledge claims and reflections and observations of their practice drawing on filmmaking participants’ experiences.
- Generic practice methodologies might eventually be replaced with domain-specific methodologies that speak to the specificities of, in this case, filmmaking practice.

BENEFITS OF PRACTICE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

- Naming the research question, methodology and methods at the outset of the project will make transparent the value of the filmmaking research, distinguishing it from industry practice.
- Filmmaking researchers can be participants, either as filmmakers, or by appearing on camera. Accommodating this ‘insiders’ position allows the filmmaker to research their practice based on their participation in the filmmaking process.
- Practice research can focus on the creation of a film’s narrative. This can include other research participants becoming co-owners and co-collaborators in the films.
- Film genres, such as documentary, lend themselves to practice methodologies where lived experiences can be filmed, to foreground truth and authenticity.
- Multiple types of research can be carried out through the making of the creative artifact. For example a screenwriter and a cinematographer might collaborate and research their collaborative practices in the making of the same film.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

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ABOUT FRN

The Filmmaking Research Network (FRN) provides insight into the condition and dimensions of filmmaking as research. FRN aims to consolidate the field of filmmaking research by sharing best practice internationally, and developing resources. Funded by the AHRC, the FRN is a partnership between the University of Sussex (UK) and the University of Newcastle (Australia).

www.filmakingresearch.net

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