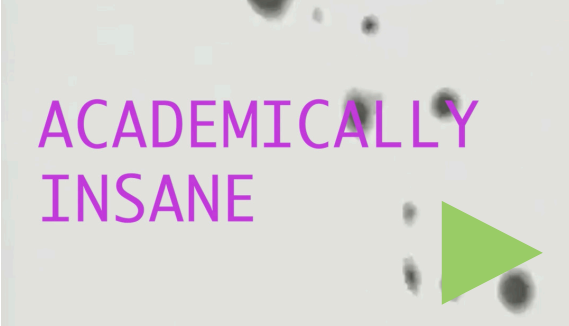


Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice

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ACADEMICALLY
INSANE



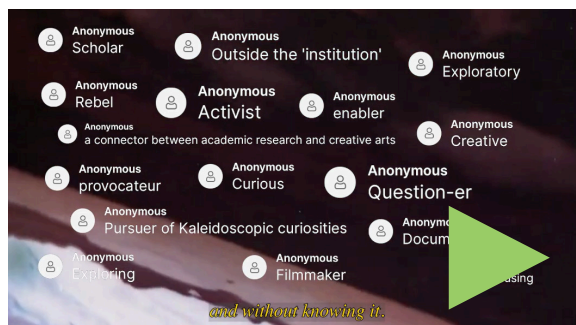
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Abstract

“Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice” comprises a triptych of video essays, crafted by the co-organisers of the inaugural B-Film Creative Practice Colloquium at the University of Birmingham. In each video, the creators reflect upon data collected during this event (including a videographic exercise, digital questionnaires, and filmed interviews). Through analysing how attendees described and executed their practice and methods, the three videos jointly and separately interrogate:

- relationships of process and product in audiovisual research-by-practice;
- the place of experimental filmmaking in academia;
- opportunities for, and impediments to, the adoption and development of filmmaking in the academy.

These works have a specific focus on postgraduate researchers and thus may provide guidance for both supervisors and future students working in creative practice research.

Keywords: audiovisual methodology, doctoral students, creative practice, practice research, filmmaking, academic identity.

Introduction: The Colloquium

The three video essays that form “Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice” are crafted by the co-organisers of the inaugural B-Film Creative Practice Colloquium at the University of Birmingham. This hybrid event in June 2023 explored identities and methodologies of creative practice researchers across a range of disciplines, with a dual focus on PhD students and on fostering a community of practice. Over twenty people attended, with online attendees from countries including Israel, Denmark and the USA. Questions were asked using the digital interactive meeting tool Slido, with answers functioning as provocations for discussion around the terminology used to describe participants’ identities and methodologies within their spheres of practice. The keynote address, delivered by Dr Richard Langley, reflected on the numerous audiovisual theses he

has supervised and their need for methodological underpinning. A practical exercise encouraged participants to reflect on their personal methodologies by creating an audiovisual piece of work inspired by a prompt artefact, chosen by Dr Langley (Warwicker 1993), culminating in a group screening and final discussion.

We recommend “Academically Insane” as an apt starting point for viewing these video essays, followed by “Without Knowing It” and finally “Joining the Dots”. The co-organisers’ reflective written statements, within the contexts of the event and wider academia, provide individual commentaries on these works before joint conclusions are deliberated.

“Academically Insane” (Nina Jones)

The documentary piece “Academically Insane” provides a space where the colloquium’s immediate impact can be observed. Contributors contemplate self-perception within the creative practice ecosystem, as well as how they are perceived by wider academic communities. Through an interview-based narrative, it captures intimate moments, delving into participants’ experiences and emotions. By placing contributors centrally within the frame, directly engaging the audience by looking down the lens, the piece explores complex themes such as legitimacy, human nature, and the concept of otherness.

The filmmaker blends data from prescribed exercises and observational footage to create a forum where individual voices resonate independently and as a collective. The questions posed in the interviews emerged organically, stemming from informal interactions, observations, and the connections that developed throughout the colloquium.

The documentary’s introduction is marked by George’s provocative proclamation: “It’s a self-help group for the academically insane... there’s the fringes [*sic*] and then there is us.” His words suggest that those engaged in practice-based research inhabit a world that is distinct, as if they embody an otherness. This concept proposes a departure from established paradigms, thereby engendering discussions pertaining to the nature of this otherness and its implications.

It also interposes inquiries concerning the realm that extends beyond known research peripheries. Cormac postulates: “Is anyone

else at my institution interested in what I do?" He intimates that his community, defined by videographic practice-based methods, and evolving from a pandemic-induced connectedness, provides a sanctuary for kindred peers. These communities offer a sense of solace; they beckon towards the potential of forging connections that transcend the boundaries of established groups and invite collaboration outside of film practice. In parallel, Sharon suggests that the beauty of creative practice lies in its propensity to elevate fundamental human attributes, thus "making us a better human being... when someone else sees it [the product(s) of our creative practice] and engages". She underscores the pivotal role of inviting participation from beyond the academic sphere, proposing it as a crucial ingredient for enduring influence.

Overall, "Academically Insane" navigates these intricate themes, encouraging contemplation about the intersections of identity, creativity, and academia.

"Without Knowing It" (Ella Wright)

[...] the rule of the philosopher's discourse has always been to find the rule of his/her own discourse. The philosopher is thus someone who speaks in order to find the rule of what s/he wishes to say, and who by virtue of that face speaks before knowing the rule, and without knowing it. (Lyotard 1989, xv)

The above quote from Lyotard, utilised in this video, exemplifies one of the conclusions that was drawn from the colloquium: that, ultimately, the rule of the creative practitioner's discourse is to find the rule of their own discourse, and to accept the potential impossibility of discovering said rule. Following that, fundamentally, the creative practitioner must create and live in the space of finding, of not knowing.

This video's primary focus is on the emotional resonances that lingered for this author after the colloquium. Predominantly, the prevailing sentiment was a sense of ontological uncertainty, coupled with a potential discontentment concerning the perception of creative practice within the academic sphere. Who are we? The answer, as seen through the statements submitted by attendees through the

digital questionnaires, is wide-ranging: scholar, explorer, provocateur. Where do we sit within our communities, if we feel we have any, and likewise within the academy? Again, the answer appears to be non-definitive (if leaning towards the negative). So how would it be possible to make a video essay leading towards any decisive argument, when the day itself provided no clear conclusions? Participants were simply left with a feeling: of gratefulness for the space to communicate with fellow human beings, of the wish that ourselves and our work (often intertwined) could be seen and appreciated, and of the need for connection free of politics. This is what this work attempts to convey.

“Joining the Dots” (Jemma Saunders)

A need for and sense of connection were integral to the creation of this video, which documents the maker’s exploration of her own methodology and identity, in light of encounters with both the audiovisual artefact and the community of researchers at the colloquium. Through the practical exercise mentioned in the introduction, above, it became apparent that everyone projected elements of their own research onto the artefact, imbuing it with meanings that were not always apparent to others, via manipulation, sound, or integration of other materials. So it is, as in the film *Dragonheart* (shown in the video), when we look “to the stars” (Cohen 1996), inserting invisible hyphens to join these dots in myriad ways, creating stories with distinct personal resonances. The cacophony arising from the juxtaposition of participants’ exercises reflects the maker’s own conflicted sense of identity, simultaneously demonstrating the range of processes at play in this experimental exercise.

McFarland (2011, 474) asserts that “As a metaphorical vehicle, the word ‘constellation’ invokes an outdated cosmology of concentric spheres; astral constellations themselves appear as planar arrangements of what are, in reality, widely dispersed astronomical bodies in the depths of universal space”. This indicates how human instincts to make meaning sometimes transcend logic, but we continue to seek connections nonetheless. This video contends that videographic criticism brings seemingly disparate elements into meaningful cohesion, and that forging links with others who work within the realms of audiovisual creative practice is a way of seeking reassurance as to our academic validity.

As in “Without Knowing It”, definitive conclusions remain elusive, yet err towards embracing the multifaceted, fluctuating elements that make a person who they are, acknowledging the impact of each element on how and what we create as practice-researchers. Drawing, quite literally, on Dr Langley’s propositions about hyphenation, “Joining the Dots” is intended as a manifestation of the creator’s thought processes around their approach to audiovisual research and their tentative identity within academia.

Conclusions

Each video and statement attribute value to the place of experimental approaches within academic filmmaking, not least for the opportunity to identify distinct methodologies. Though created individually, it is telling that they are thematically similar (largely reflecting on connection), and that they deploy many similar elements from the day. Therefore, as these three videos work interdependently, as well as functioning as three separate entities that can be viewed alone, “videographic triptych” seems an apt term to describe them (despite the religious connotation). Indeed, this term has precedence in videographic work, one example being “Mobilizing Women In a Few Easy Steps! (A Feminist Triptych)” by Melissa Dolman, published in *[in]Transition* (Dollman 2023).

Affording participants the time and space to experiment during the colloquium was universally welcomed. Everyone suggested that working with an abstract prompt forced them to consider the ways in which they approached their research, with many exploring their subject areas in new ways. Notably, it transpired that all attendees had to either put aside another part of their identity to take part in the colloquium or could not attend in its entirety because of other responsibilities. We highlight this to emphasise the importance of acknowledging the self within creative practice research. Whether through insertion of voiceover, editorial choices, camera angles, or other creative decisions, personal insertions are present across our triptych, and in all attendees’ responses to the artefact.

While many participants felt part of a wider network of creators, whether from professional industry backgrounds or within the academic videographic community, most averred that a network of doctoral researchers employing audio-visual methodologies was lacking and that, institutionally, there was little support or under-

standing for their distinct creative praxes. While it is acknowledged that imposter syndrome and isolation are common feelings experienced by PhD students in all disciplines, it appears those engaged in practice research remain in a minority at their institutions. This fact may be central to the exacerbation of the feelings documented here, perhaps especially so in the UK context. The prevalence of the response “isolation” in the Slido questionnaire points to a need for greater support for doctoral students in particular, the lack of which may be inhibitive to future growth of academic filmmaking. This tangible sense that we must justify ourselves and our work as legitimate research could, therefore, benefit from what Barrero-Fernández et. al. (2023, 261) term “‘Educational Constellations,’: macro-networks that generate links between schools and different types of institutions as an essential tool for educational improvement.” At the risk of overextending the metaphor explored in “Joining the Dots”, there is a wish to have an impact beyond our own small constellation, a term which could, in fact, be used instead of triptych to describe the three videos presented here, as well as the related audiovisual work created during the colloquium. Indeed, the concept of constellation as a way of theorising practice-based research merits further exploration and expansion in future work, beyond the scope of this publication. The Creative Practice Colloquium is, we hope, a starting point for such Educational Constellations to be established and further traversed.

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Consent was obtained in writing for the reproduction of faces, voices and created materials that have been (re)used in this submission.

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