

DOCTORATE BY MEDIA PRACTICE

A Case Study

Erik Knudsen

Introduction

In July 2002, I gained a doctorate by practice from the University of Salford. Given the debate in HE media education about practice as research, I thought it useful to contribute to this debate by outlining the practical steps I went through to gain my PhD with a view to this being of some use to others wishing to explore this avenue.

For some time, I had been toying with the idea of studying for a PhD, but because of my commitment to film practice I had always felt that to embark on a theoretical PhD programme would distract me from my fundamental interests, by taking me into territory in which I had no real interest as a practitioner. Within my practice, there were clearly areas of theoretical interest, but ultimately I was looking for a way in which further study would contribute to the enhancement of my practice, first and foremost, and perhaps, through critical reflection to develop a deeper understanding of my work and its relationship to the work of others.

I was aware – not least because of AMPE and the debates at its conferences, as well as articles in various journals, including JMP – that the question of practice as research was, and is, an indication of the maturing of the media practice education sector. By this I mean that the notion of media practice programmes – in particular postgraduate programmes – merely being training opportunities for aspiring young people intoxicated by the lure of the film and television business, on the one hand, and the industry inadvertently deferring its training responsibilities to HE, on the other, was evolving into a sector aware of the potential for playing a significant role in the development of media arts practice. I think here of research, publication, debate and innovation. For such developments to progress, pedagogy, research and publication needs to continually evolve and become a bedrock of institutional life of higher education. For me it was increasingly clear that PhD study had to play its part in this evolution.

This combination of my interest in developing my own practice as a filmmaker, and my interest in participating in the continuing development of the medium through pedagogy and research eventually led me to approach our Associate Director for Research in the School of Media Music and Performance, Professor Derek Scott, at the University of Salford where I work. This was in the academic year 2000/2001.

University Procedures

Though a number of staff within the school held PhDs, almost all were based on theoretical and academic submissions. However, I discovered during my meeting with

Professor Scott that one or two staff members within the Music Division had received PhDs on the basis of portfolio or published work submissions. Indeed, Professor Scott himself had supervised a number of other PhD candidates who had made their submissions on the basis of practice.

Within music practice education, therefore, it seemed clear that submitting for PhDs through portfolio and published work was already established practice, both within composition and performance. Indeed, in other creative sectors such as Art and Design, submitting for PhDs through portfolio and published work was also established practice. Why not media arts?

Professor Scott believed that my interest in submitting a PhD by practice could not only benefit me personally, but could also provide the school with an opportunity to develop a new strand to its existing educational and research activity. We consulted the head of the School of Media Music and Performance, Professor Ron Cook, and he agreed.

However, the university had no existing PhD programme within the area of media arts and an amendment to the university's [constitution] to include media arts would therefore be necessary. The first task was for Professor Scott, as a member of the university's senate, to propose a new strand to the existing slate of the university's PhD programmes and for this proposal to go through the various committees for scrutiny and approval. The precedent set within music proved very useful in smoothing the process and by the end of the academic year 2000/2001, the university senate approved the addition of 'media arts' to its list of PhD programmes. Professor Scott and the School of Media Music and Performance's commitment to making this change was crucial to even getting to the starting block. Up to this point, I had had no involvement in this process, except, perhaps, being the spur to action. It was first at this point that the challenges I was to face would commence.

Key Criteria

The school might have been at the starting blocks, but I wasn't quite there yet. As with any PhD study, I had to identify a supervisor, prepare a proposal and apply to the institution. I had decided to try and submit by published work: i.e. submitting films I had already made and which were in the public domain. No one within our institution had supervised a media arts PhD by practice and I therefore turned to professor Scott with a request for him to supervise me. Before he would agree, he needed to see a proposal and the work I intended to submit.

The PhD in media arts was to follow the same model as that of music; the submission would consist of published work (films that had received broadcast and/or public exhibition and were, or had been, available to the public) and a 10–15,000 word critical evaluation. The balance between these elements was again clear: the published work itself was to be the predominant driving force of the submission, with the critical evaluation being supplementary to this (I shall return to this).

Professor Scott wanted to see the possible films to be submitted and to read my proposal in order to evaluate whether he felt a) that the research aims, objectives and outcomes identified in the proposal were sufficiently evident in the films; b) that the standard of the work would be worthy of a PhD by adding to knowledge or understanding in the field; c) that my contribution to this work, given the collaborative nature of film practice, was of sufficient scale and depth to be considered PhD level. I was submitting this work as a writer/director and could therefore demonstrate sufficient control of the creative work for this to be the case. It should be pointed out that it is perfectly possible for someone to submit for a PhD in the capacity, for example, as a camera person – it is not necessarily the role itself that defines what is admissible in terms of point c) above, but that the contribution being made to a film by the student can be deemed substantial enough for the student to have control over the specific research aims and objectives being identified. With collaborative contributions, such a justification may become an important part of the critical evaluation.

I submitted three films that I thought would form a research narrative: One Day Tafo, a 70 minute creative documentary that incorporates both fact and fiction; Reunion, a 50 minute creative documentary which, likewise, incorporates fact and fiction; and Signs of Life, a 70 minute fiction film. All three films had an evolving research narrative in terms of form and content and it was this narrative I wished to address as part of my research. I identified these research aims and objectives in a 2000 word proposal which addressed the following questions put to me by Professor Scott:

1. What do you aim to have achieved by the end of the research project?
2. What are the research questions or problems that you intend to address?
3. What are the issues that you will be exploring in the course of your research?
4. Why is it important that these questions or issues be explored?
5. What other research is being or has been conducted in this area?
6. What contribution will your research make to improving, or developing knowledge or understanding in your chosen area of study?
7. How are you going to set about addressing the questions that you have set yourself, or explore the matters you intend to investigate?

These are, of course, generic questions and I had to interpret them in the context of media practice and the fact that I was wanting to submit published work. It is easy to get sidetracked into debating the word ‘research’ endlessly, but I reminded myself that the submission and its evaluation was going to be based primarily on the film work itself. I therefore went about translating what I was trying to achieve as a filmmaker into research questions. So, for example, looking at question two, I would ask myself: what are the creative problems, the creative limitations of established practice, that I am trying to challenge and how? Or, looking at question four, I would ask: What is it I feel, as a filmmaker, are the limitations of the classic narrative and what are the consequences that then make me want to tell a cinematic story differently?

It is clear from having to address these questions that practice on its own is not enough. The evidence emanating from within the practice must demonstrate that one is seeking to add to existing knowledge or understanding of the medium, its relationship to content and its relationship to audience. The critical evaluation merely seeks to elaborate on this evidence and to place it in a context; for example, of other filmmakers working towards similar goals, or not, as the case may be.

Had I been embarking on a submission by portfolio, the issues and questions would remain the same. However, I would have been embarking on the work, rather than having completed it. In this sense, to submit by published work, one would have had to already have been committed to some form of deliberate innovation in one's work, irrespective of academic requirements.

Professor Scott agreed to supervise my work and I was then able to formally apply to the university to become a PhD student.

Practice and Reflection

The answers to the research questions set for me were fashioned into an abstract which then formed part of my application to the university. There are formal stages an application goes through within the university, and in particular the postgraduate office. But once a supervisor has agreed to supervise a student these tend to be a formality. As a staff member, the school agreed to wave my fees. The submission date was set by me, with consultation with my supervisor, simply because I was submitting by published work.

One of the first issues I had to deal with together with my supervisor was that of the scale of the submission. Normally for a submission based on practice, as a rough guide, one would look at work which would reasonably have taken 3 years to produce. This could, for example, be a feature length film as a writer/director/editor which would have involved research, writing, production and postproduction, or a series of shorter pieces, or a combination. We agreed that I would submit all three films mentioned above; the reasoning being that as this was the first submission being made under media arts we wanted to be absolutely sure that the quantity of work submitted was not questioned and also the fact that in terms of the research questions, all three films had strong links. By submitting three films, we also felt that the quality of the research would be even more apparent by being evident across an oeuvre and that, as a first submission, setting the highest standards was imperative.

My task now was to start work on the critical evaluation. I remembered the story about Napoleon and one of his generals. It was common practice for Napoleon to receive reports from his generals from the field on a regular basis. Once he got a report from one of his generals which was rather larger and more voluminous than previous reports. However, on the front of the report there was a little note apologising for the size of the report which had come about because he, the general, had unfortunately not had time to write a shorter report. The idea of a critical

evaluation of only 10-15,000 words can be deceptive, particularly as one has to translate creative aims and objectives from a creative context into an academic one.

For me, the creative process is very much an intuitive and, dare I say, spiritual process. Nevertheless, I have been preoccupied with reflecting on my work in terms of form and philosophy and to write a critical evaluation was therefore a welcome opportunity to articulate, intellectually, creative aims and objectives. My thesis was entitled: *The Dispassionate Mirror – Towards a Transcendental Realism in Media Practice*. In my work I have been trying to develop a form of cinematic narrative that reaches our feelings of transcendence, as opposed to the classic cinematic narrative's preoccupation with what I call psychological realism. I set about contextualising this effort in terms of my personal influences, in relation to the work of other filmmakers and in relation to the socio-cultural situation in which the films were made. I then laid out my starting point in terms of the shortcomings of the classic cinematic narrative forms and went through in detail to highlight how I, in my films, had departed from that classic cinematic narrative and reworked the form to explore new possibilities and how the emerging new form was enabling me to reach aspects of experience that I feel are not being reached in most films we see today.

As a filmmaker, I intuitively had a good sense of what I was trying to do. To formulate this into a coherent argument was both difficult and, ultimately, very rewarding. Throughout, I was being guided by my supervisor, who would read drafts at every stage and give advice. I found that to keep the critical evaluation under 15,000 (I ended up with 18,000) was a real challenge. Always in the back of my mind, I had this hangover of a notion that the quantity of the written submission, the extensiveness of my bibliography and filmography somehow were crucial to the quality of the final piece. In this sense, I was guided well, as my supervisor would always remind me that the work itself was the main evidence. Of course, as academics we are steeped in the tradition of the written word as the predominant method of discourse and expression of knowledge and the battle between this overbearing tradition and my instinct as an artist was very alive. Within the critical evaluation, the most important thing was to contextualise the work – for example, who else has been working with similar themes and approaches and what have they done? – and highlighting how I, as a filmmaker, was adding to the knowledge and understanding already achieved. It was also important to be true to the actual process – in my case that meant that some of my references and the context of my thinking was somewhat eclectic and there was no question of hiding this by trying to make my approach more academic – as I traditionally understood it in the epistemological sense.

In the late spring of 2002, I was advised that I was ready to submit. I made final corrections and had my films put onto DVD and VHS for the submission.

Evaluation

Given that attaining PhDs by portfolio or published work in media practice was, and still is, I believe, a very new thing, the process of finding and deciding on who the

external examiners would be for the viva proved difficult and the university had to take advice. Not only was it a requirement that the two external examiners be prominent practitioners themselves, but at least one of them was to have a PhD. In the end they were able to identify two such people: Dr Anna Grimshaw, from the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at Manchester University, and Sandy Lieberson, the celebrated producer and former Head of Development at Paramount Pictures in the US.

The prospect of having to defend my submission in front of those two examiners quite frankly terrified me. I had little real idea of what to expect and to what extent I would be questioned or challenged. In the end, as is often the case with things one fears, it didn't turn out as my worst nightmares suggested it could. Their questions, observations and comments were insightful, probing and challenging. There was no antagonism, no posturing or asserting of egos. Quite the contrary, I came out of the viva knowing more about my own work than when I went in.

There were five possible outcomes: fail, offer of MPhil if the work was deemed to be to that standard, pass with a re-write and another viva, pass with a re-write and no viva, or pass with no further amendments necessary. I was fortunate to pass without further amendments required. It is perhaps worth remembering that at PhD level, an examiner's reputation can be affected by what they pass, and scrutiny is, as a consequence, very intense and vigorous.

Conclusions

I can imagine that in certain circles like the film and television business, to call oneself a doctor of philosophy would be smirked at. I believe that many of the generation within the industry who did not go to film school or media school may consider such a venture as attaining a doctorate by practice a bit of a farce. Of course, if it is for show purposes, then they would be right to be suspicious. However, I have found the whole experience very worth while, even though I do not consider myself a theoretician. I have gained a greater understanding of my work as a consequence and that is the main benefit. And as with any achievement, one should take some pride from it, mixed with a solid dose of humility.

Another aspect to this achievement is that I believe higher education can forge a strong presence within the overall media sector by defining its role as the place where innovation, research and development is taking place. If the sector were able to do so, the business would soon be turning to the education sector more frequently to establish partnerships that go beyond getting cheap impressionable labour. If the educational activity within HE had strong roots in such practice based innovation and research, the quality of the programmes would strengthen and the results, hopefully, would become apparent on our television and cinema screens.

I now look forward to supervising PhD students in the future, as I see contributing to such research by practice as an exciting opportunity to participate in the development

of the medium, the talent and our perceptions and understanding of the world in which we live. We in this media education sector have a tendency to have an inferiority complex about our place in the academic tradition and hierarchy – indeed within the business sector, too – but reflecting on it, it is clear that we are part of an exciting new educational sector which attracts many students and which contributes to, and helps inform, a large cultural industries sector within our culture and economy. As educators, we are effectively in a position to shape things the way we believe they should be shaped by, perhaps, challenging preconceptions that exist within traditional academia, and indeed, the film and television industries. Debate is one thing, action another. Just do it!

Erik Knudsen

If anyone would like to enquire more about PhD opportunities in media arts by practice at the School of Media Music and Performance, University of Salford, please contact Dr Erik Knudsen at e.knudsen@salford.ac.uk or on 0161 295 6213, or for more general enquiries about PhDs within the school, contact Professor Derek Scott at d.scott@salford.ac.uk or on 0161 295 6134.