"Minding the Gap":
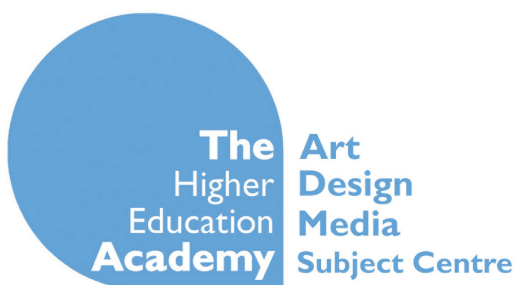## Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

Postgraduate & Early Career Researchers Training Day
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford
Saturday 12th May 2007

Convenors: Paddy Coulter (Reuters Institute) & Cathy Baldwin (ISCA)

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Sound and Image: Alternative Methods of Research and Presentation

Chairs: Cathy Baldwin, University of Oxford and Dr Charlotte Crofts, University of the West of England (formerly of London South Bank University).

Summary of Panel Presentations by Dr Charlotte Crofts,
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Can audio-visual practice be both a methodology and a form of dissemination for research? What are the particular issues for researchers working in media practice and what is the status of practice as research in terms of speaking for itself, or needing additional written documentation? How useful are the established definitions of practice research? In what ways is practice research pushing at the boundaries of documentary filmmaking? What is the relationship between academic practice research and the industry? These are the issues that arose in this very stimulating film panel, consisting of four presentations and screenings of practice research, each contributing to debates around the relationship between theory and practice.

Adnan Hadzi started off by introducing his Deptford TV project (www.deptford.tv) - a practice research project exploring the possibilities of online media and collaborative filmmaking. The research is a collaboration between Goldsmith's College, Deckspace Media Lab, Bitnick Media Collective, Boundless Project and Liquid Culture Initiative. Hadzi's presentation introduced two key aims of his research: one is to archive and create a database of footage documenting the regeneration process of Deptford, South East London, working closely with the local community; the other is to then make this footage available to artists, filmmakers and people living in Deptford in order that they can re-edit and share the material online. Hadzi's research explores how new media can revolutionise the relationship between filmmaker, subject and audience, enabling the subjects of the footage to also be authors of edited 'timelines' which in turn can be commented upon or changed by the viewers. This was illustrated by a clip from the project *Deptford Now and Then* by Gordon Cooper, which intercuts between archive footage of the Deptford power station, images of the community film archive and the archive projectionist's reflexive pieces to camera. In this way, Hadzi's research challenges our concept of traditional 'broadcasting' and explores the opportunities of peer-to-peer and user-generated content for community film, research questions which clearly could not be explored through traditional publication alone.

The second presentation '*I Think I'm Turning Academic, I Really Think So'* by Trevor Hearing took the form of a 15-minute documentary which uses a self-reflexive performative mode of documentary to challenge the assumption that practice research cannot stand on its own, without written contextualisation. Hearing kicked off with a brief introduction to his video, situating it within the context of his professional practice in broadcast documentary, his subsequent move in to academia and the tension between his industry experience and the status of practice as research. Hearing's film takes as its raw material footage shot in the development of a documentary on the secret early history Britain's nuclear arms development and the finding of mysterious metal bars by a costal fisherman in the North East. The video interweaves this footage with footage from another professional work on the construction of the Angel of the North and its cultural context in the industrial landscape of Tyne and Wear. Hearing uses this footage as the 'data' for an 'autoenthographic' research project which challenges the relationship between professional practice and research. The video comments reflexively on itself both as a piece of filmmaking (a voice over discussing the use of the 'long take' over a lengthy point of view shot of a motorway, Hearing appearing in the documentary directly addressing the camera), and as a piece of research (with academic quotations about 'New Journalism' in a typical expository (middle-class, white, male) narration, at one point ironically undercut with the sound of sloshing as the camera moves over a Morecombe Bay-like tidal beach). Within the film, Hearing examines the status of historical evidence, representation and the production of meaning both in the context of professional broadcast documentary and the academy. The video explores the possibility of practice research 'speaking for itself', with the route-map of the research process embedded within the documentary, rather than being externalised in a written contextualising statement.

The third presentation '*High Definitions*': *Articulating Media Practice As Research*, by Charlotte Crofts, explored the AHRC definition of practice research which draws a very clear distinction between practice as research and professional practice, using her own documentary research project as a case-study. Crofts argued that whilst practice is clearly a useful methodology through which to explore media and film theory, it still remains a contested cite within the academy. Crofts argued that practice research differs from professional practice mainly in the way in which it is framed and reflected upon within a research context, going on to elucidate this by exploring her current research into the impact of digital technology on feature film production. Screening a 3-minute pilot of work in progress, Crofts shared her dilemmas for the future development of the research and pointed

towards a number of different routes for the documentary. The pilot is a montage of footage shot at Kodak, Technicolor, Panavision and the Curzon Community Cinema, Clevedon, supported by audio extracts of interviews with key industry players about the coming of digital cinema. These disembodied voices offer a cacophony of conflicting points of view, revealing that digital cinema is a highly charged and emotive subject for the film industry. Lush visuals of celluloid being caressed and threaded into various projectors, are accompanied by the voice of the aging projectionist who sees his role as a performance, as opposed to digital projection which is just 'pushing a button'. Crofts' project is both to document the materiality of the supposedly dying medium of celluloid, and to reflect on this moment of transition to high definition, digital post production and exhibition. Crofts' dilemma is whether to explore her research questions through the grounded case-study of the Curzon (which claims to be the oldest, continuously running, purpose-built cinema in the world, yet is the first screen in the South West to have a digital projector as part of the UK Film Council's Digital Screen Network), or whether to attempt a more ambitious project encompassing the wider film industry. By exploring these themes through audio-visual practice, using pro-sumer HDV technology and digital editing software, Crofts is also using an embodied, experiential research methodology, which makes the impact of digital technology on film production the process as well as the subject of her research.

The final presentation by Tony Dowmunt, '*Video Diary-Making As a Research Method: Just Another Jargon of Authenticity*' explored his own research trajectory whilst undertaking a three year AHRC Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts. Dowmunt described his research process in developing a video-diary based film *A Whited Sepulchre.* The film takes the colonial travel journal of his great-grandfather AK Slesser as its starting point, documenting Dowmunt's own journey to Sierra Leone through the lens of his ancestor's imperial gaze, reflecting on the cultural specificity of two generations of white British male experiences of Africa. Dowmunt's work takes the form of a self-reflexive video-diary, intercut with his great-grandfather's diary entries and contemporary location footage. To illustrate this, Dowmunt showed a clip from the middle of his film in which the RP voice of the narrator reads Slesser's account of his 'plunge' into the 'barbaric' heart of Africa to the village of Robari, over images of a young African boy diving into the river from the side of his canoe. There is a tangible *frisson* between the dialectic between the narrator's politically incorrect language and cut glass vowels, and the footage of contemporary Africa. Dowmunt goes on to reflect on his own feelings of fear as he retraces his great-grandfather's steps to a remote village,

now known as Bari, after having himself recently had a brush with mortality with open heart surgery. Dowmunt's practice research questions the 'authenticity' of autobiography in both written and audio-visual form, and explores complex issues around identity formation, historicism and cultural difference, in a way that a purely written account could never achieve.

All four presentations raised very interesting questions about the relationship between theory and practice, the status of professional practice in the academy and the nature of practice as a research methodology. The discussion after the presentations was very rich with contributions from both academics and practitioners who were keen to further unravel the complex relationship between professional or industry structures and the academy. One point was made that the kinds of filmmaking that are happening in the academy used to be supported by the TV industry, especially in the early days of Channel 4, but as the landscape of broadcast documentary has become more commercial and format-based, the opportunities for more intellectual and reflexive work have become limited. This, in tandem with the increase in the need for the teaching of practice, has opened up a creative space within HE whereby industry professionals, who have been employed because of their practice credentials, have found a more open environment in which to make work. Ironically, it was felt that the very professional credentials that made practitioners attractive to the academy, could also become a barrier to their work being accepted as research. There was a great deal of discussion about how to contextualise practice as research, drawing on Hearing's video, which attempts to include the academic context within the artefact. Overall, it was a very interesting panel, with a lively debate around how best to bridge the perceived gap between practice and research within audio-visual practice.