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From Aristotle to the Avant-garde - the conundrum of assessing creative work in the context of wider academia

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Diegetic Life Forms and Diegetic Logic – Assessing Image-based Scholarship.
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I dedicate this paper to Jean Painlevé, the French underwater scientist, filmmaker, Bugatti racing car-driver, and one-time head of the French Department for Film. He typifies for me the energy and creativity that best exemplifies the merging of seemingly disparate cultures – an energy I hope to bring to this discussion of assessing screen-based scholarship.

In the spirit of Painlevé, I aim to examine aspects of the assessment of creative work (which in our particular case is moving pictures), by drawing some ideas and inspiration from existing discussions about the criticism of literature, painting and poetry.

I wish to particularly look at the validity of assessing completed creative work only, rather than examining the creative process that has led to the finished work. I also want to consider experimentation in the arts, relative to experimentation and discovery in the sciences, and how one can assess work that, because of its originality, is breaking existing conventions, that may form the basis of assessment criteria.

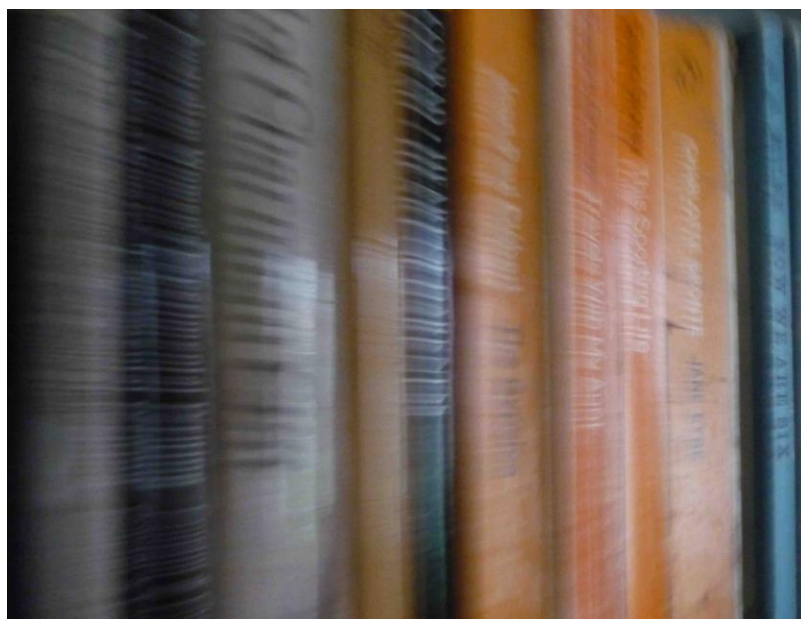


Figure 1

I was recently browsing through the Man Booker Prize website, seeking some insight into the judging process for that highly coveted literary award. One of the 2008 judges, Alex Clark, observed that while considering the numerous entrants, she needed to clarify her own criteria:

The problem with literary culture is not that there are bad and good novels but that there are so many that can be described as average, or good enough.

But good enough for what? And I begin to wish death and destruction on ‘pseudo-novels’, the books that look like novels and consist of many novel-like attributes – plots, characters and imagery for example – but somehow seem to lack the strange alchemy of style and subject matter, the dizzying experience of being introduced to another subjectivity, that true works of literary fiction must have.
(Clark, 2008)

The Man Booker judges enter into fairly colourful debate over who’s to win, and the administrator of the prize admits, “ ‘Over my dead body’ was a phrase repeated more than once”, she said, “at which another judge would counter softly, ‘Yes, but worth giving another try’ ” (Rocco, 2009).

Nevertheless, despite the critical sparring, another judge admits, “...the process of debating fiction is itself a rewarding and illuminating activity” (Davies, 2007).

I suspect that the reason the Man Booker judges take on the formidable task of reading more than a hundred novels, over seven months, lies less in the reading pleasure, than in this lively ensuing discussion of what makes a good novel – a similar process we often find ourselves in, when assessing screen-based works by our students.

But the point to remember here is that the Man Booker judges are principally judging from the reader’s point of view.

Margaret Atwood, the 2000 Man Booker prizewinner, once wrote when discussing the 2009 Man Booker International winner, Alice Munro, “You call this writing? Alice Munro! Now that’s writing!” (Atwood, cited in *The Economist*, 2009).

So here we have a writer defining what it is to write, what writing is – indicating that perhaps only practitioners themselves are qualified to judge the process. Atwood’s remark thus shifts our discussion from how work is received to how it was formed.

The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, once said, “intellectual criticism of poetry will never lead to the centre where poetic images are formed” (Bachelard cited in Strand, 1978).

Or, as Hayden Carruth has elaborated:

Poetry is a mystery. I don’t mean the poem on the page, though that is difficult enough. I mean what went before; poetry as process, poetry as function of what we call...the imagination. Think how long science has worked, thus far in vain, to explain the origin of life....Then think of trying to explain the imagination; first the imagination in general, then a particular imagination; the factors are incalculable.
(Carruth, 1975, p.52)

Others even go so far as to decry the destructive power of criticism:

... we might [even] say that the degree to which a poem is explained is precisely the degree to which it ceases to be a poem. If nothing is left of the poem, it has become the explanation of itself, and readers of the explanation will experience only the explanation and not the poem.
(Strand, 1978, p. 458)

As media teachers, most of us fortunately are practitioners, and should therefore be able to articulate and appreciate process. So where can we start?



Figure 2

Here at the University of Melbourne we have been furnished with assessment guidelines to focus our considerations – these are known as the *16 Indicators of Effective Assessment in Higher Education*.

Number four of the sixteen proposes that, “There is a clear alignment between expected learning outcomes, what is taught and learnt, and the knowledge and skills assessed – [that] there is a closed and coherent ‘curriculum loop’” (James, R., McInnes, C., and Devlin, M., 2002).

So if the Man Booker judges, for example, were assessing here at the University of Melbourne, one would assume they had insight into the experimental approaches and methods trailed and selected by the author, in arriving at the final book. They don’t; and as judges of “the read”, should they?

Number twelve of the *16 Indicators* recommends that, “Assessment tasks are weighted, to balance the development (‘formative’) and judgemental (‘summative’) roles of assessment” (James, R., McInnes, C., and Devlin, M., 2002).

Given that academic assessment aims to assist students along the way with their learning outcome, it is considered advantageous to provide formative assessment throughout the assessment task.

The value of judging solely the completed work is questioned, as its impact on the student's progress can be limited.

The Man Booker judges would have to be reading and feeding back on drafts, to help the winner to win. But they don't. As readers, not writers, their feedback on drafts could only help from one point of view, reception, not creation.



Figure 3

Now theories of what makes valuable criticism have a history, and the debate between outcome and process has been central to much debate on the value of work – artistic, scientific, historical and philosophical.

For those of us who work with students of fiction and dramatic structure, it is worth considering Hayden Carruth, who, in his essay, *The Question of Poetic Form*, confronts the nub of this debate and defies the “father of dramatic theory”. Carruth says:

What about Aristotle? ...He was no poet; far from it. ... He wrote about art from the point of view not of the artist but of the spectator, the playgoer....This is interesting and useful, and from it certain ideas may be extrapolated about the work itself, the play. But about playwriting, about art as process? No..... A real theory of art begins with the process...A spurious theory of art begins somewhere else and tries to explain everything.

(Carruth, 1975, p 52)

So, as the University of Melbourne assessment guidelines hint at, does the assessment of final work only, from an Aristotelian or Man Booker point of view, without insight into process, lead to “spurious theories”?

To be an artist, to flex the imagination, to develop processes for transforming a concept from inception, and to find the right form for its expression – this is a long, and usually arduous process - that while hidden from the audience, is the majority of the work.

As teachers of the craft of moving picture making, the development of the work occupies the majority of our efforts too. We design curricula to guide creative students through a set of strategic tasks that will develop them as creative thinkers and practitioners, and aid them in evolving a successful form to express their ideas, to tell their stories.

However, when we assess work, as audience only, we give limited regard to this artistic process, despite its centrality to the learning outcomes we set for our courses.



Figure 4

American art critic, Harold Rosenberg, writing about the Action Painters of the mid 20th century, defined “serious” painting as the record of an action related to “a transforming process in the artist...the artist’s total effort to make over his experience” (Rosenberg, 1952).

But, as Richard Shiff sees it (1978), the transforming “experience associated with a work of art may be that of the artist or that of the audience....The viewer might sense movement or find himself moving before a work... ...[as] the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe, for example, wrote [in 1904] of a still life by Cézanne:

There is no movement [in the painting]; the subject before me is a simple still life; and yet I feel something in the pupil of my eye quivering, as if set in motion by some movement taking place in the higher dimension.
(Meier-Graefe, cited in Shiff, 1978, p 112)



Figure 5

But, for Shiff, unless we can attribute such sensations “to a specific describable property, what can we learn from the work? What generalisations can be made, other than that works of art stimulate us, that in their presence we feel alive?” (Shiff, 1978, p. 112)

We put a lot of emphasis, in our assessment, on successful communication to the audience – but the audience is a group of individuals. To communicate effectively to most of the audience can mean heavy reliance on widely understood conventions. Conventions can tend to mask original thought. There may be a rigorous and original creative process undertaken by the student, that is not necessarily evident on screen – particularly if it remains hidden behind conventions.

So is assessment of the creative process that leads to the final work, a more helpful and appropriate reflection of the content of our courses, and a more apt measure of whether learning has taken place?

Recently, here at our film school, we changed our assessment guidelines in the undergraduate stream, to align them more with course content.

At our school, where practice-based learning is central to the pedagogical philosophy and curriculum design, we are largely teaching process. And yet this was not measured per se by undergraduate assessors examining the final work only.

Our assessors were like the Man Booker judges.

They had no insight into the history of the creative and practical skills brought to the project by the student filmmaker while, as I have said, this is the bulk of the teaching focus.



Figure 6

Up until recently, our assessment process assumed that if it “works” up on screen then the choices along the way must’ve been the right ones – and so we didn’t assess how the students made those decisions. But how they make decisions is everything about our teaching.

So we altered the weighting from the first year of the undergraduate stream up to the honours students, so that the final work, as it looks up on screen (measuring principally its impact on audience) is given more weighting for the later year students than it is for those starting out, whom we weight with more emphasis on process and strategy.

So, thinking back to the University of Melbourne’s *16 Indicators*, assessment with greater regard to the development of an argument (the film, in our case), rather than on the result alone, could be seen as more aligned to conventional formative assessment in wider academia.

Even the most unconventional of work, perhaps especially the most unconventional of work, benefits from regard to the process. But the challenge for us, as assessors, is that the process may sway from our norms, and be difficult to measure.

Let’s consider what is valued elsewhere in the worlds of art and science – what might receive a High Distinction there? Let’s think about poetry, painting and science, instead of moving pictures, and see if our conundrum is really so unique.

In his essay, *Art and Life: A Metaphoric Relationship*, Richard Shiff (1978 pp. 116 – 117) observes:

Baudelaire...concerned himself with the distinction between a perfected academic art...and a flawed but beautiful art. For Baudelaire, beauty was found in the idiosyncratic, the bizarre, *that which could not be measured against any established standard, that which resisted translation into the terms of the known.*

(my italics)



Figure 7

Shiff goes on (1978, p.108):

We have come to expect and demand novelty from our art; we associate artistic genius and creativity with originality and invention rather than with excellence and distinction. We choose as artistic heroes those like Cézanne and Van Gogh known for an unresolved even awkward art, but *an art clearly departing from accepted norms*. The ultimate work of art, perhaps more confusing than Cézanne's, more frenzied than Van Gogh's, *would seem to bear us so far beyond our present reality that we could form no judgement of it in comparison with accepted masterpieces*. Indeed works of art are often now evaluated not in terms of comparison but, negatively, in terms of contrast; we praise breaking a tradition or convention, ...American "action painters" ...when asked what their art was, they explained what it was not.
(my italics)

U.S. artist and arts theorist, Richard Kostelanetz, in his essay *Avant-Garde* (1972 – 78, p. 249), claims, "In both art and science, there is no future in doing what has already been done." He cites Ezra Pound's dictum, "Willingness to experiment is not enough, but unwillingness to experiment is mere death."

Kostelanetz likens the novelty and experimentation of art and science when he notes that, "Avant-garde writing resembles experimental science in that both incorporate, to quote my *Webster's* 'an action or process undertaken to discover something not yet known' " (Kostelanetz, 1972 - 78, p.244).



Figure 8

Kostelanetz furthers his argument, quoting Francis Bacon, the father of experimental science. Bacon noted, back in 1620 (the year the first successful submarine craft was invented and built), that, “It would be unsound and self contradictory *to expect things which have never been done can be done except by means which have never been tried*” (my italics) (Kostelanetz, 1972 - 78, p.245).



Figure 9

The first submarine illustrates this point of view brilliantly. One can imagine the scepticism, on the banks of the Thames River, as what can best be described as a leather-encased wooden rowboat was lowered into the waters. It carried twelve brave oarsmen plus passengers, and stayed submerged for several hours, with a series of air tubes, supported on the surface by floats, bringing oxygen down to the intrepid submariners.

So to reward creative work in media production departments, that breaks new ground, that re-defines the field, that compels the assessors to re-design their rubrics, we are talking about work that uses language and form in inventive and unanticipated ways – that defies our assessment criteria and standards.

How can such work be assessed fairly and comparatively, relative to the class of other filmmakers who have all undertaken identical studies, but have not arrived at the same result?

Remember Alex Clark, the Man Booker judge? She said she looks out for a “strange alchemy of style and subject matter“ (Clark, 2008).

Such alchemies are frustratingly mysterious. Recipes for success aren’t revealed to the uninitiated, and certainly hard to teach in film schools. So how do we label them, identify, and categorise them? Can we all recognise where there’s alchemy, and not be duped by ‘pseudo-novels’, as Alex Clark warned – “books that look like novels and consist of many novel-like attributes”, but are not true works of literary fiction?

There are certainly qualified practitioner / peers out there, but how can we ensure they are qualified to assess - to recognise, quantify and rank the alchemies?

And how can we ensure that assessment is doing what it should do – feeding back to students in a way that will further their learning?

While assessment should reflect curriculum, we must ensure that assessment doesn’t negatively drive curriculum. In the recent public debates about nation-wide numeracy and literacy testing in Australian primary and secondary schools (NAPLAN), critics warned that:

..not everything in education can be weighed and measured...It is sad that even in primary schools, creative, stimulating teaching has become stifled by a curriculum that is no longer determined by what engages children and fosters their growth, but rather by what can be put in boxes, ticked, graphed and given a ranking.
(Long, 2009)

and even that:

It risks taking the joy out of learning, and stifling our children’s potential as dynamic and creative learners.
(Douglas, 2009)

Art and science are sometimes considered enemies, but they share much that is valuable when considering assessment. As Richard Kostelanetz remarks (1973 – 78, p. 249):

the most consequential experiments are those which are acknowledged by at least some peers....and one practical measure of the value of a current experiment is its capacity to inspire further experiment.....I [am] unable to think of any step-ahead artistic experiment that did not eventually have some sort of perceptible impact upon future art.

If there is “perceptible impact” we should be able to identify it when we see it.

Citing the work of US academic and literary critic, Eric Hirsch, French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (2003) says, “All of modern creativity theory confirms that there are no rules for invention, no recipes for the concoction of good hypotheses, only rules for the validation of hypotheses.”

With these thought I hope we can all move forward in consideration of our current assessment practices.

I propose we start by confirming whether it is to the final result, rather than the experimental process, that we are right to be focusing our assessing eyes and ears. We should then devise transferable criteria and standards that can be acknowledged by wider academia, and be relevant to the creative thinking and work that goes into our students' projects, and also be constructive for students' ongoing development as artists.

I conclude by presenting this painting by Turner. It is an image of blindness in a storm, and was so vulnerable to criticisms of abstraction at the time of painting, that Turner decided to incorporate the phrase: *The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich* into the painting's title. In other words, far from being an abstraction, to Turner this was extreme realism, depicting his authentic experience, no matter how far the result departed from prior, known, representations of storms.



Figure 10

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A cinema whose house is always full. Posted by J. Powers at 2:22 PM, 28 March 2008. <<http://conceptexcellence.blogspot.com/>> Retrieved 30 June 2009.

Fig. 4 Jackson Pollock, *Lavender Mist: Number 1*, 1950; Oil, enamel, and aluminium on canvas; 221 x 300 cm; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 5 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with an Open Drawer*, 1877-1879; oil on canvas, 33 x 41 cm. Private collection.

Fig. 6 University of Melbourne Film School students filming in French Polynesia, 2008. Image by author

Fig. 7 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cms, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 8 Replica of the first submarine, at Richmond Upon Thames, invented by Cornelius Drebbel. Available: *Exploring of the Sea* by Drewwer in History. Posted: October 26, 2008 . <<http://purpleslinky.com/.../exploring-of-the-sea/>>. Retrieved 30 June 2009.

Fig. 9 image source unknown. Available: *How Does a Submarine Work?* Stephen Whitt, Posted: September 1, 2008. <www.yesmag.ca/how_work/submarine.html> Retrieved 30 June 2009.

Fig. 10 JMW Turner, *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich*, 1842, oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cm. Clore Gallery, Tate Britain.