The Primacy of Practice?

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CRITICAL SOURCES FOR MAKING SENSE OF THE THEORY-PRACTICE DIVIDE IN FILM AND VISUAL STUDIES

Synopsis

In this paper I explore the theory-practice nexus as it manifests itself within film and visual studies. Starting from an institutional history of the troubled relation between film theory and the teaching and conduct of imaging practice, I locate this disjuncture in a broader analysis of the social division between intellectual and manual labour within capitalist society. I discuss Aristotle's distinctions between *theoria, praxis* and *techne* and relate this to the contemporary divisions between the theoretical, critical and technical elements of teaching film. I argue that a discussion of the relationship between theory and practice within film and the visual arts is best approached by a serious consideration of the 'politics of theory'.

The Problem

The last twenty years has seen a massive growth in film, media and communication studies within further and higher education. Many institutions have made considerable investments in production facilities and in staff to teach moving image practice. Practice based doctoral studies have also been implemented in Great Britain and Ireland and creative project work now supplements the presentation of a written dissertation in a model of 'practice-based research' now attracting interest globally.[1]

However the expansion in media practice teaching and research capacity within higher education has not been accompanied by any great clarity about how the various critical and discursive elements of courses drawn from the field of film, cultural and mass communication studies - 'theory' - should relate to studio based provision with its distinctive project-based pedagogy, professional orientation and creative aspirations - 'practice'. With universities under pressure to maximise their research performance and to meet a range of vocational demands, the gap between critical theories of film and the business of teaching practice has in fact become wider over the last few years. Film and media theorists increasingly talk to each other within a research economy built around peer reviewed achievement in traditional scholarship. Teachers of film and media practice, on the other hand, are under increased pressure to adopt a vocationally driven, skills-based model of media teaching in response to student and corporate demands.

Some in media arts have sought to develop a distinctive 'practice- based research' tradition to address this disjunction. Lecturers in schools of creative and performing arts anxious to compete with their colleagues in humanities programmes of study, have cautiously begun to redefine their traditional activity of making and exhibiting art works as *research*. In the UK at least, the introduction in 1986 of a national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to grade the research of all institutions and to allocate public support funds accordingly, has encouraged arts institutions to identify the art objects produced by their staff as 'research outputs'. Indeed there have been substantial rewards for this with a number of institutions managing the new research economy to great effect. Almost overnight British universities became important sponsors of arts projects as photographers, film-makers, and a range of other visual artists with impressive portfolios were recruited to boost the research performance of departments and colleges.

On the other hand, not too many searching questions have been asked about the how art works - paintings, sculpture, films, designs, performances - submitted for assessment could be held to constitute research, an activity normally thought to involve the generation of new knowledge rather than the production of art objects. How should we view this characterization of creative work conducted within the academy as *research?* Should it be viewed primarily as a defensive strategy on the part of art educationalists to address the parlous financial state of arts education within higher education? Is there an epistemic justification in regarding artistic activity and output as *research*?

The problem is not that anybody doubts that artists engage in research in the preparation and making of their work. But, are the array of research practices habitually employed within the field of art and design,

including media arts and primarily concerned with the investigation of materials, media and creative strategy in any way comparable to those found in the natural and social sciences? Can we identify a set of replicable methodologies and a common theoretical grounding that might found a research tradition?

Artists experimenting in their studios or in the field do not by and large articulate their developmental work in the form of distinct research questions or hypotheses to be tested against specific experimental 'data'. Nor, do they see themselves as testing art theory. As a producer of creative documentary films I hire specialist researchers to locate relevant archival images or to track down interviewees. I call on the services of academics such as historians to advise on the development of scripts in matters of accuracy. Similarly for those working in fiction the development of the script rests on extensive research into the cultural background, language, habit, psychological make up and motives of characters and into the visual elements that make up a film's 'look'. Such background research is rarely of a primary nature and is harnessed to the demands of 'informed programme production' rather than the disinterested pursuit of knowledge within a discipline.

The research activity that media makers undertake prior to the execution of a creative project is integral to its successful realization. Indeed this is one of the reasons why we as teachers mentoring students' film practice work place such emphasis on this research and development work. Such R and D can function as a laboratory of ideas and of grounded experiment in aesthetic strategy. This research has as its specific focus the realization of a creative project *sui generis.* It is not primarily concerned with general methodological precepts or conclusions or with divining law like regularities in artist's behaviour, nor with arriving at binding judgements of taste in the aesthetic sphere. The focus is primarily on 'making work' and not in 'talking up' product. In other words, while an artist's research facilitates their practice, the primary focus of their creative process remains the art project and its expressive life and not an abstract knowledge object.

Beyond Text?

Other parts of the publicly funded, research support apparatus in the UK have been slow to acknowledge the import of practice-based arts research. Thus the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the government-funded body that supports, arts and humanities research (with a budget of £108 million for 2010-11) has acknowledged the importance of visual culture and other non-text based forms of research activity with the introduction of a major research programme *Beyond Text*. This initiative (budget £5.5 million over 5 years to 2012) was supposedly designed to encourage a rethinking of the privileging of the written word within the humanities and to promote an engagement with visual culture and performance. As the AHRC announces on its website[2],

> we have entered an era where not only the written word, but also performances, sounds, images and objects can be circulated more rapidly and widely than ever before. In response to this, the AHRC has created *Beyond Text,* a strategic programme to generate new understandings of, and research into, the impact and significance of the way we communicate.

However, the advent of visual culture as a field of university study has been greeted with a certain ambivalence within the academy. As art historian Norman Bryson argues, visual culture may be heralded as an innovation within the field of critical practice - 'the belated, post facto emergence within the university of a regime of visibility that has already come into pre-eminence within the rest of cultural life' (Bryson 2003:231) but it has also been regarded as, 'an absorption, a normalization even a capitulation', to a world awash with the toxic images of the mass media.' Fellow art historian Barbara Maria Stafford (1996:4) firmly rejects this dystopianism with its, 'deprecating rhetoric that stakes out bookish literacy as a moral high ground from which to denounce a tainted "society of the spectacle". Her *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* celebrates the role of the visual image in human understanding, arguing that, 'imaging, ranging from high art to popular illusions, remains the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas (1996:34). Laura Marks is one of the few contemporary film theorists prepared to admit that film work, particularly in the avant- garde tradition, can involve at its core a dialogue between critical theory and strategies of practice. Discussing the work of visual ethnographers Trinh T. Minh-ha and Julie Dash in her seminal *The Skin of the Film* (2000: xiv) she argues

> The works I examine in this book are themselves works of theory, many explicitly so. They are not waiting to have theory 'done to them'; they are not illustrations of theory but theoretical essays in their own right. The works themselves have developed a sophisticated argument for

how cinema can represent embodied experience and why it should do so.

This is not an argument likely to command much support within the traditional academy. Despite its visionary rhetoric, *Beyond Text* has promoted a range of projects which by and large employ traditional humanities' written discourse to discuss visual culture and performance. It has not engaged with visual practice by visual and creative means. The AHRC continues to reject the notion that the production of an artwork - in and by itself - might constitute research. As its guidelines on practice-based research state:

> Work that results from the creative or professional development of an artist, however distinguished, is unlikely to fulfil the requirements of research.

Put crudely, creative arts practice, whether conducted at the doctoral level[3] or via an externally funded project, only becomes research *de facto* when the deliberations of the artist /researcher are delivered in writing and a body of theory identified to provide contextualization of the art object.

Film Theory and Creative Practice in the Moving Image

We might assume that an adequate contextualization of film practice is likely to come from film theory. We'd be mistaken. While film theory[4] is the core of an academic study of film that has expanded spectacularly within our universities over the last quarter of a century, its relationship to the teaching of practice has, as I have suggested, become increasingly distant. Ironically many of those involved in teaching and researching film practice feel a greater methodological affinity with a range of disciplines other than film studies - with history, anthropology, art and design, of course, but also with information technology studies, architecture and engineering - really any discipline that focuses on creative innovation and which takes seriously the contribution of experiential learning and professional experience. That is any discipline other than film studies.

Let me sketch some of these interdisciplinary filiations. For historian Robert Rosenstone (1995) an analysis of avant-garde film practice poses the possibility of a 'postmodern history' rethinking of concepts of evidence, truth and objectivity. For Paula Amad (2010) a consideration of Albert Kahn's archival imaging practice in his *Archives de la planète*, occasions a line of enquiry[5] into how historiography dealt with photography as evidence. This concern has also been pursued over a number of years by the *Visible Evidence* conference[6] a research gathering which brings together documentary film-makers, archivists, historians, anthropologists to explore the role of non-fiction film and image making as record and witness.

As curator Elizabeth Edwards has noted (Edwards 1994), the career of anthropology has been coextensive with the history of lens- based practice. Moreover, as Marcus Banks observes (Banks 1999), the introduction of the camera into the ethnographic encounter has forced anthropologists to think about subject position, representation of the other and the mediation of social action and memory. The engagement with inter-cultural cinema (Marks op cit) has led to a refashioning of critical concepts concerning the haptic and mnemonic dimensions of film and explored the role of film as 'prosthetic memory'. Indeed the work of a range of fine artists now working primarily with the moving image and with filmic narrative, such as Douglas Gordon (1997), Willy Doherty (2008) or Steve McQueen (2009), has encouraged all of us to think further about the fallibility of memory and to explore innovative forms of filmic language beyond the Hollywood hegemony. Patrick Keillor in his *Robinson* trilogy (1994, 1997, 2011) has explored the interface of film practice, architecture and public space in his quixotic pursuit of the post-industrial sublime, while Eamonn Crudden has engaged with network theory and explored the appearance of 'mob' film making by new social movements capable of exploiting the architecture of the world wide web.

What is distinctive about these interdisciplinary encounters and their rhizomatic form is the extent to which lens, screen and now network-based imaging practice has shaken up the more staid disciplines of the human and material sciences, encouraging methodological innovation and critical reflection on an unprecedented scale. All of this happening with little or no reference to film theory. Even in the most abstruse of engagements with film as a visual practice, namely Gilles Deleuze's work (1989), we witness not an application of philosophy or theory to film (the misguided aspiration of analytical and phenomenological approaches to film analysis) but an attentiveness to the character of film *as philosophy*.[7]

Historical Antecedents

It is perhaps not insignificant that film theory first emerged as a body of reflection from a circle of practitioners

faced with the pedagogic challenge of providing instruction for a generation of demanding students in a challenging resource environment. I refer to Soviet society of the 1920s and early 1930s and to the critical and educational work of Eisenstein, Kuleshov and Pudovkin at the state sponsored All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). The Russian film industry had been nationalized in 1919. VGIK, the world's first film school, was founded at the instigation of Lenin to support the industry. Film resources - stock and equipment - were very scarce in Russia. However the teachers at VGIK responded to the challenge of provide practical training to students with a range of innovative pedagogic ideas combining the exploration of critical and aesthetic strategy, political salience and technical know-how in equal measure.

These film-maker pedagogues sought to dissect the grammar of the moving image in order to properly instruct film students. VGIK existed alongside VKhUTEMAS, the Russian state art and technical school founded in 1920 in Moscow, also as a result of a directive from Lenin. VKhUTEMAS aimed, 'to prepare master artists of the highest qualifications for industry, and builders and managers for professional-technical education.' Both schools operated within a wider artistic culture of experiment and application and constructivism was to become the most vigorous expression of this. Eisenstein did not take up a formal position at VGIK until October 1932 but gave lectures and conducted workshops in the school from its foundation. As early as 1922 he had played a leading role in the creation of the Proletkult Theatre Workshop and through his work with the school began to develop his theory of montage. In his teaching he sought to introduce his students to an approach to film which drew on an understanding of diverse media and cultural forms. This drew on painting, photography, visual design, literature and philosophy. Both his personal journey to artistic awareness, from engineer to *montageur* and the parallel development of a radical pedagogy of arts instruction involved as he put it, "a one man struggle against the windmills of mysticism that the solicitious hands of obliging sycophants had placed at the approaches to the mastery of artistic methods to confuse anyone in their right mind who wanted to master the secrets of artistic production". (1987) For Eisenstein, the roles of theorist, practitioner and pedagogue were intimately intertwined. All of them were given their charge by the revolutionary situation he found himself within. Writing in 1932, shortly after his appointment to VGIK, and fifteen years after the October revolution, he reflects on how these facets of his life had already come into alignment by the early 1920s.[8]

> At this stage an unexpected correspondence suddenly appeared between what I had encountered in the analytical work I had been doing (...) and what was happening around me.

> My art students, to my considerable astonishment, suddenly drew my attention to the fact that in teaching them their artistic alphabet I was using exactly the same method as the politics tutor dealing with social questions who was sitting next to me.

Experimentation, research, practice, pedagogy represent a unity for Eisenstein:

> As far as my personal creativity is concerned, my systematic scientific and pedagogic practice are inseperably intertwined (at the State Institute of Cinematography, VGIK).

And that unity is driven by a political sensibility:

> my next films will include attempts at experimental practical 'mediation' (*oposredstvovanie*) of the secrets of creativity and of the opportunities for cinematic expressiveness to master the most effective methods of revolutionary art and to equip pedagogically the generation of young Bolsheviks who are coming to take the place of the cinematic masters of the Revolution's first Five Year Plan.

Eisenstein also contributed to the journal *Lef*. Under the editorship of Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovsky this provided an important forum for constructivism and for the discussion of lens-based practice. *Lef* published, for example, Eisenstein's essay on the 'montage of attractions' (No. 3. 1923) as well the photo designs and montages of Rodchenko's work which seems to have directly influenced Eisenstein's formulation of a theory of montage. Though initially developed with regards to theatrical practice, this theory soon found an application to film.[9]

Rodchenko held a teaching position at VKhUTEMAS while finding time to act as designer on Eisenstein's *October* and on a range of other films. He was later responsible for the introduction of a curriculum in

lens-based practice at VKhUTEIN.[10] *Lef* also gave space to his critical essays on photography. These employ dazzling visual strategies to explore the key contribution of lens-based practice to the revolutionising of visual thinking.

> Photography has broken free from being secondary and imitating the techniques of etching, painting or carpet making. Having found its own way it is blossoming and fresh breezes bring a scent that is particular only to photography. New possibilities lie ahead. (...) The contrasts of perspectives. The contrasts of light. The contrasts of form. Viewpoints that are not possible either in drawing or in painting...

His thinking about this new visual language is refined in and through his teaching at VKhUTEIN.

Alongside this pedagogic imperative was a parallel concern with exploring the cultural dynamics of film with a non-specialist audience via critical reviews in the popular press and by means of more theoretically inflected writing for specialist periodicals. Both radical pedagogy and popular publication continued to shape the evolution of film critical discourse right up to the 1960s. The development of classical realist film theory in the hands of Kracauer, Arnheim and Bazin, owed more to a practice of cultural criticism than to formal pedagogic concerns, but all of these figures wrote from outside the academy: Siegfried Kracauer worked as film and literature editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from 1922 to 1933, while Rudolf Arnheim performed a similar role in Berlin with *Die Weltbühne.* After the second world war André Bazin wrote on film for a variety of specialist periodicals - *L'écran français, La revue du cinéma,* and encouraged by Sartre, for the philosophical journal *Les temps modernes,* before becoming editor of *Cahiers du cinéma.* Similarly the documentary film reflections of Grierson and Rotha in the 1930s (including the engagement with Dziga Vertov's work), the writing of the *nouvelle vague* film-makers and critics in the 1960s in *Cahiers du cinéma* and the critique offered by third cinema in the 1970s[11], were formations of critical discourse elaborated from outside the academy and circulated through specialist periodicals, cinema clubs and primitive cinematheques, adult education initiatives and ad hoc film training workshops.

In other words the critical study of film emerged alongside the development of film as a broadly based cultural practice rather than as a university based academic specialism.

Contemporary film studies has different auspices born out of:

1. the expansion of higher education from the mid 1960s and the broadening of its social base
2. the belated acceptance by the academy of the cultural significance of cinema
3. the proliferation of new modes of theorising focused on culture and consumption
4. a concern with 'relevance' and vocational outcomes in the new higher educational institutions

Certainly film studies emerged as part of a counter-cultural moment within our universities from the 1970s but the radicalism was short-lived. The new field challenged both traditional pedagogy and the organization of the humanities curriculum around the close reading of canonical texts and processes of class socialization. However it has had a hesitant relation with the teaching of film practice. In its early manifestation film studies was of course a largely theoretical affair with only a few select institutions in the UK investing in film production facilities (the National Film School was founded in 1971, the Royal College of Art introduced a film programme in 1976). Nevertheless, there was at this time an openness to practice. Theory and practice were seen as two moments within a unified film culture the study of which represented a critical challenge to the traditional curriculum and pedagogy of the humanities.

However, as Griselda Pollock reminds us, (2003:254) new subject domains born out of counter cultural enthusiasms can age very quickly:

> The informality of such novel formations rapidly gives way to a necessary formalization to meet the requirements of the institution in which alone its practitioners can survive (...) the formative axis of dissidence and displacement, of disciplinary formations and interdisciplinary critique no longer operates and the latter's originary openness turns into a more formalized 'discipline' by default. It is inherited by those who only know its inside.

The professionalization of film studies within the academy was accompanied by an adoption of institutional formulations of research practice now almost completely divorced from a living film culture. Thus, the

'second generation' of film academics seemed reluctant to critically engage with the practice-based modes of learning now technically possible because of the video revolution and the lowering of the entry costs into moving image production. From the outset the teaching of media practice was tainted by an association with 'mere skills training'. Strongly influenced by film theoretical considerations shaped by the importation of continental theory into the Anglo-Saxon world, film studies seemed to marginalise the teaching and study of practice.

Media and film studies academics felt that the best way to establish the status of their discipline within the academy was via the theoretical efficacy and research thrust of their subject. In effect this meant the study of film as text. Film academics harnessed the sophisticated procedures of reading made available by first semiological, then deconstructivist theory. Film studies as a field of study did include historical elements and on some programmes a recognition of the industrial and economic facets of film production, but genre study and inevitability, the formulation of a canon and of 'key concepts' developed apace. In general film and media studies was trying to look as far as possible like any other social science or humanities discipline. Careers were being made via publishing in peer reviewed journals, such as *Screen*[12] and in academic book series and not via creative film work or practice teaching. Theory and practice drifted apart. Put bluntly, the relationship between film theory and film practice became characterised by a certain *dyspraxis.*[13]

Theoria, Praxis and Techne
The word 'Dyspraxia' is made up of two parts of Greek origin: 'Dys' is the Greek prefix for 'bad', while 'praxis' is a complex term which the contemporary term 'practice' only approximates in meaning. The concept of *praxis* is perhaps best approached in relation to the Aristotelian triad of *theoria, praxis,* and *techne.* In these distinctions Aristotle challenges the hierarchical relation of theory and practice found in Plato's work. In the latter's *The Republic*, the philosopher has a privileged access to knowledge of the ideas and this provides the basis for subsequent political and moral governance by a philosophically schooled elite. *Theoria* for Plato is the rational and contemplative vision of metaphysical 'truths'. His use of the term draws on an older Greek tradition of the *theoria* as a sacralized spectacle. For Plato the activity of philosophical contemplation is modelled on that of the *theoric* or spectator at a religious festival. The *theoric* returns to public life after their encounter with the spectacle of truth to instruct and lead his fellows. The term *theoria* is similarly used by Aristotle to refer to the contemplative pursuit of pure knowledge. *Theoria* is a desirable end in itself but has no practical import. For Aristotle, *theoria* does not provide the basis for either personal or social action.[14]

Aristotle's starting point is that of a civic humanist rather than that of a prophet or journeying *theoric.* Only participation in the political life of the city makes the citizen capable of the good life. Rhetoric and the closely related studies of ethics and politics are the means of producing citizens with practical wisdom, or *phronesis.* For Aristotle, *praxis* as the exercise of practical wisdom is not merely a set of technical problem solving skills. The latter Aristotle calls *techne* the skillful production of artifacts and the mastery of skill to do this. Nor does *praxis* depend on a mastery of some set of theoretical abstractions given in the platonic forms. Practical wisdom is anchored on a broad-based understanding of the shared experiences, precepts and traditions of the community. In the exercise of such wisdom we draw upon these shared traditions and discover our own place within them. Reference to this font of experience enables us to discover how best to proceed in a particular situation by building on shared understandings. We also extend these through our engagement with new challenges that arise out of the practical problems faced by the community rather than from purely theoretical speculation. From this perspective, practice is holistic, grounded and self-reflexive. This reflexive hermeneutic is the one recent proponents of reflective arts practice such as Kathleen Grushta (2005) have hinted at.

Aristotle's triad of *theoria, praxis* and *techne* undercuts any simplistic dichotomy of theory and practice that often limits art practice to the mere techniques of craft. Perhaps Aristotle's conceptualization is a good place to start to reformulate the theory-practice nexus within film and the visual arts. Can the notion of *praxis* be the basis for such a rethinking?

Certainly it seems to me that film theory increasingly approximates to the condition of *theoria.* That it is an enjoyable contemplative exercise - and who amongst us is not prey to the allures of theoretical diversion - but one divorced from any significant relationship to cultural practice. Some of this isolation of theory is

conjunctural - the generational downturn in social radicalism under the impact of the neo-liberal political economy - but some of it is self-chosen. In the 1970s film theory did seek to establish its relationship to practice - understood as a contribution to a process of social transformation rather than to technical film practice - via its claims to provide a critique of ideology and an unmasking of the unequal power relations of capitalist society. However by the 1980s this critique transmogrified into a more diffuse analysis of representation and engagement with the politics of identity. With the adoption of ever more diluted, if convoluted, notions of critical practice this political saliency has declined substantially. Theory - literary, cultural and filmic - became a 'conversation among academic professionals'.

As Aijaz Ahmad argues in his text *In Theory* (his focus is literary theory but the argument seems to also apply to film theory)

> literary theory in the Western academy over the last few decades has not only been anaemic, self-indulgent and eclectic in the worst sense, but has also provided a distraction from the actualities of power, of violence and of repression on a worldwide scale.

Film studies became a subject area dominated by theorists and the teaching of film and media practice too often became relegated to the realm of technical instruction. Film studies academics seem to think that any lack of a critical dimension in production teaching can be compensated for by film students exposure to 'theory' in the core part of their programme. Students are invited to 'contextualize' their practice activity in relation to the film theory they are offered. Yet, whatever film theory currently constitutes as a discourse - whether ideology critique, analysis of representation, disinterested study of cultural text and aesthetic strategy, or post-structuralist methodological exercise - it is clearly not a theory of practice, in the sense that Noël Burch, for instance, uses the term.[15] So we have to look beyond current constellations of 'theory' to find a suitable model for critically informed practice.

Aristotle privileges *praxis* over *techne* as he does *praxis* over *theoria*. However he often seems to place *praxis* and *techne* in a synergistic relation. Perhaps he was aware that in Greek society *praxis* as social action needed to be in harmony with the productive capacity of *techne*. Issues of social stratification arise here. For while all citizens of the polis can engage in *praxis* and should exercise *phronesis* (the virtue of practical wisdom), not all of those entrusted with *techne* and economic production - artisans, servants, slaves - have the right to participate in political life. The philosophical tradition rests on the facility of slave labour and on a separation of intellectual and manual labour. To understand the contemporary problem of relating theory and practice within the visual arts we need to trace the separation of head and hand back to its historical origins.

Intellectual and Manual Labour

In his key work *Intellectual and Manual Labour: a critique of epistemology* (1978) Alfred Sohn-Rethel, the critical theorist associated with the Frankfurt Institut für Socialforschung (though never a member of the school) sought to relate the radical division of intellectual and manual labour in European society to the development of the capitalist mode of production and to the dominance of the commodity form within this. As he argues:

> The class antagonism which commodity production engenders in all its stages - in Marx's terms, 'the ancient classical, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois modes of production, are intrinsically connected with closely corresponding forms of division of head and hand (p9)

He traces the drive to abstraction in western thought to the law of value and its expression in the money system.[16] From this perspective the dichotomy between theory and practice has its roots in the technical and social division of labour. The division of intellectual and manual labour maps onto patterns of class formation. Sohn-Rethel's book draws upon Marx's analysis of the commodity found in the opening chapters of *Capital* and on the subsequent analysis of reification offered by György Lukács.[17] But he draws upon other sources, notably the account by classicist George Thompson of the material roots of Greek philosophy. Thompson (1955) sees the emergence of a philosophical tradition in Athens and the drive to abstraction more generally in Greek thought, as related to the abstract character of exchange value and to the experience of the money system. Through the circulation of money, a calibration of objective, equalizing value is expressed. Sohn-Rethel seeks to extend Thompson's analysis to the modern period. Here his focus is the birth of

modern science and transformation in art and design practice in a European society increasingly based on wage labour.

For the creative arts the Renaissance, rather than the enlightenment, is perhaps the key period during which the division between intellectual and manual labour becomes entrenched within an economy still run on mercantilist lines. From the early fifteenth century the visual arts, including sculpture and architecture, begin to be considered as intellectual rather than artisanal pursuits in so far as they drew upon the new sciences of mathematics and projectile geometry in their fashioning of perspective modelling. Sohn-Rethel traces the evolution of architecture, engineering and art practice from a craft basis to an intellectually driven one. He identifies the use of mathematics by the new intellectual/artist as the key break from artisanal modes of knowledge.

> Mathematics cuts a deep cleft between a context of thought and human action establishing an unambiguous division of head and hand in the production process (p112)

Sohn-Rethel gives us an illuminating discussion of Albrecht Dürer's attempts to reconcile the new mathematically informed approach to art and older craft traditions. The latter continued to be pursued without recourse to the formal procedures of mathematics and the new science. However the mysteries of the atelier had given way to the authority of science. Dürer, seemingly inspired by a sort of guild utopianism, attempted to combine Euclidean geometry with craft practice in a specially designed artisanal 'sub-geometry' of measurement in which workers would be instructed in their workshops and which would be assimilated into their daily practice. But as Sohn-Rethel argues, this strategy was ultimately doomed as the mathematics still remained too daunting for the craftsmen. The Renaissance completed the severing of intellectual and craft practice. (p116)

The emergence of specialist art academies (Accademia delle Arti del Disegno in Florence, in 1561, and the Accademia di San Luca in Rome in the 1580s) rested on the improved status of a practice of fine art shaped by science, the intellect and academic tradition and distinct from 'mere craft'. In turn, the new academies played their role in establishing the social status of the fine artists and in the marketisation of their work.[18]

To adequately understand the historical intellectualization of art practice we need to relate this then to the calcifying social division between intellectual and manual labour within early capitalist society. With the triumph of scientific rationality in the Enlightenment and the increased significance of the technical division of labour in industrial capitalism, the separation of intellectual and manual labour became further entrenched. Indeed the reforms in art education in Soviet Russia and in Weimar Germany, associated with the Bauhaus, while they invoked socialist productivist rhetoric (and in the case of the Bauhaus, craft nostalgia) to challenge the intellectual and manual division of labour in industrial society, were less than successful in overcoming these divisions.

We are still living with this division. Indeed it profoundly shapes the current debate about theory and practice within arts education and the role of intellectualization within arts practice.

The Politics of Theory and the Pragmatics of Practice
Habermas (1974) in his classic discussion of theory and practice also sees the early modern period as crucial. His focus, of course, is on political philosophy rather than art theory. He traces the transformation of the classical doctrine of politics, with its civic humanist roots, into an enlightenment tradition of politics now based on a rigorous science of human behaviour and of means-ends rationality. He traces the decline of the concept of praxis within western thought and its replacement with a view of the theory-practice nexus as a technical problem. This is how it is often understood within film studies where certain versions of film theory aspire to an axiomatic status *vis-à-vis* creative practice.

In the enlightenment, prudence gives way to science now understood as explanatory - predictive technique. *Civitas* has become *societas*, *zoon politikon* the bourgeois private individual, art increasingly a commodity.

Habermas identifies three distinctive forms of knowledge activity shaped by distinct human interests. Each of these poses a distinctive relation between theory and practice.[19] Thus the natural sciences address an object world of inanimate bodies in motion, "here we experience things, events and conditions which are capable of being manipulated by technological intervention". Their 'logic of discovery' concerns the testing

of hypothetical claims to validity via the collection of objective evidence accumulated by observation and measurement. This logic finds its most formal expression in the deductive nomological model sketched by Hempel and Oppenheim (1948). One of the chief characteristics of this positivist model is the symmetry of explanation (via covering law) with prediction (via causal implication or probabilistic inference). Within this model practice - understood as instrumental action - is in effect the technological application of scientific understanding codified in a covering law and mobilised in a prediction.

It might be thought from the outset that such a model ostensibly drawn from the natural sciences has little relevance to the arts. However, a version of it (with the deductive-nomological requirement softened) has been introduced into art and design research. Darren Newbury and his colleagues in the Arts Research Training Initiative based in the University of Central England (RTI 1996) have sought to bring generic models of research drawn from a positivist rendering of the social sciences to bear on art activity.

> At its simplest research can be understood as a process involving a period of information gathering, or in research terminology data collection and a period of data analysis bounded on either side by some sort of theoretical work. Generally this takes the form of proposing a particular question about an object or group of objects (theory), observing the object(s) in question (data collection), reflecting on this observation (data analysis) and then answering the original question on the basis of this observation (theory).

This language of pseudo-positivism is now a feature of research grant applications across the arts and humanities, including practice based research in media arts where it functions as a discourse of bureaucratic accountability by funding organizations rather than scientific investigation.[20]

Habermas's second type of knowledge concerns the human sciences. Much of the methodological debate within the social sciences has been about the applicability of positivist method to a sphere where man is both the subject and object of investigation. Habermas is attentive to Max Weber's monumental attempt to reconcile the claims of positivist method with the practices of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. He identifies a modality of knowledge predicated on an engagement with human meaning and interpretative understanding.

Through the act of interpretative understanding conducted in and through language the researcher seeks to comprehend the meanings that the other brings to their action. Habermas does not directly engage with the creative arts in *Theory and Practice*, nor does he directly engage with empirical social anthropology in his characterization of the hermeneutical sciences.[21] However the art theorist Hal Foster has more recently identified an 'ethnographic turn' in the visual arts. This is I think particularly prevalent in lens-based work, not only in ethnographic and documentary film and photography, but across a range of arts disciplines where artists seek to address the time, place and culture of the 'other'. Foster explores the attractiveness of an anthropological perspective to contemporary artists but expresses concern with regards the critical credentials of such an approach which he labels 'pseudoethnographical':

> I am not entirely cynical about these developments. Some artists have used these opportunities to collaborate with communities innovatively: for instance, to recover suppressed histories that are sited in particular ways, that are accessed by some more effectively than others. But I am sceptical about the effects of the pseudoethnographic role set up for the artist or assumed by him or her. For this set up can promote a presumption of ethnographic authority as much as a questioning of it, an evasion of institutional critique as often as an elaboration of it.

For Foster the ethnographic turn is not necessarily a critical one, just as for Habermas a hermeneutics of social action (or we might add, a practice of critical reading) has no necessary commitment to a programme of social change.

The third constellation of theory and practice that Habermas identifies is characterised by its critical character and emancipatory interest. Critical theory for Habermas - building on Horkheimer's delineation of the term - involves a commitment to unmasking the relations of power, 'surreptitiously incorporated in the symbolic structures of speech and action'. (p12) While the natural and hermeneutical sciences do not in their core methodologies establish a link between their origins and the applications of their theories in practice, critical theory does so. The knowledge it provides 'coincides with the fulfilment of the interest in liberation through knowledge'. The two paradigms of critical theory Habermas identifies are the historical materialism of Marx

and Freud's psychoanalytic paradigm, both of which are to shape the evolution of film theory. Whatever the differences between these theoretical constellations - and Habermas has been criticised for failing to distinguish between the two - they share an interest in the emancipation of the individual through their enlightenment.

> Critique understands that its claims to validity can be verified only in the successful process of enlightenment, and that means: in the practical discourse of those concerned.

In what can only be seen as a direct reference to Marx's *XI Thesis on Feuerbach*, Habermas declares,

> Critique renounces the contemplative claims of theories constructed in monologic form, and in addition, discerns that all philosophy up till now, in spite of all its claims, also only presumes to have such a contemplative character. (p2)

So when Habermas addresses the problematic relationship between theory and practice he is concerned not with issues of technological exploitation of knowledge, nor with the hermeneutic concerns with cultural description and understanding, but with political action in a public sphere. Theory has a role in facilitating communicational action and with the raising of the consciousness of subjects as a spur to collective activity which has an emancipatory aim.

Conclusions

What then are the implications of these philosophical concerns and the resonance of these critical sources with regards our understanding of the problematic relationship between theory and practice within the field of film studies today?

Firstly, let us accept that the current mantra to integrate theory and practice within the study of film is an increasingly glib one primarily driven by marketing considerations. The fact that it has become such a holy grail for curriculum planners and course publicists has to be questioned. The requirement to relate theory to practice is often directed at students and focuses on how they conceptualize, develop and report upon their creative projects. I would have to say it's a strange field of study that expects its students to achieve an integration of theory and practice in an institutional situation where their lecturers so signally fail to achieve this in their curriculum offering and pedagogy. The political economy of higher education is in fact driving the teaching of film theory and media practice further apart as academics follow professional self-interest. However as we have seen, the disjunction between theory and practice is deeply embedded in the modern university and has its roots in the obdurate division between intellectual and manual labour.[22]

Traditional universities and established department of humanities have an undisguised horror of anything that looks like training for manual labour and this is so despite the lip service university leaders now give the so called 'skills agenda' that has emerged from the Leitch Report.[23] The masochistic enthusiasm displayed by many British academics for the processes of research selectivity displays a refusal by many academics to challenge the class based hierarchies which run like a fault line through the entire British education system and which in the contemporary humanities express themselves in the inflation of theory at the expense of creative and socially engaged practice. Research selectivity has encouraged the traditional elitism of traditional universities and encouraged the continuing binary and hierarchical character of UK higher education. Arts education and practice based research in the media arts unwittingly finds itself located in a particularly precarious point on this fault line.

Secondly, historical reflection indicates that the happiest relation between theoretical speculation and lens-based art practice has occurred in the context of a general radicalization of art practices in societies undergoing social transformation. The early soviet era, like that of the Weimar period, provide important historical exemplars of art institutions that were capable of bringing theory, social critique and cultural practice into a productive alignment. That was then and this is now but these historical exemplars can illuminate the development of art pedagogy and practice in an era of social crisis.

Lastly, the injunction to relate theory and practice requires us to ask - what sort of theory? What are the politics of current theory? To what extent has the abandonment of the emancipatory interest of theory conditioned the retreat of film studies into academicism at the level of theory and propelled it into a crude vocationalism in terms of its teaching of practice? In the current crisis in higher education, which mirrors

the broader collapse of certitudes in the capitalism economy, can we rethink arts education and the role of the media arts within this?

Notes

1. The terminal degree in arts education in the US and Canada remains the MFA with its distinctive studio focus. However with the integration of art colleges into broader university structures and competition between subject areas for scarce resources often distributed on research performance criteria many arts educators are exploring both notions of 'practice- based research' in the arts and, in particular, the practice-based PhD as an alternative to the MFA. See my "Is there a doctor in the house? A riposte to Victor Burgin in the practice based PhD", *Journal of Media Practice* 9, No 2, 2008, 171-177.

2. www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/BeyondText.aspx.

3. PhD candidates pursuing their studies in the moving image via creative practice still feel themselves under institutional pressure to produce a written dissertation not significantly different in scholarly ambition from the theses of academic film studies students while tackling a major programme of studio work, hence the double PhD jibe that they are in effect undertaking two advanced graduate programmes at the same time.

4. We can define film theory as that portmanteau of analytical concepts, methodological precepts and critical sensibilities which focuses on the study of cinema. The boundary between film theory and film criticism has been a fuzzy one reflecting not so much the different epistemic status of these modes of film discourse but their institutional location.

5. Amad's pioneering study of the Albert Kahn archive in Paris also engages with a range of philosophical issues. Kahn was a friend of Henri Bergson and Amad considers Kahn's idiosyncratic archival practice in the context of the latter's characterization of memory.

6. visibleevidence.org/18/index.php/ve18/VisEv18.

7. As the translators of Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989) argue in their introduction (xv):

> This is a book of philosophical invention, a theory of cinema as a conceptual practice. It is not a question of 'applying' philosophical concepts to the cinema. Philosophy works with the concepts which the cinema itself gives rise to. … Cinema and philosophy are brought together in a continuing process of intercutting. This is philosophy as assemblage, a kind of provoked becoming of thought.

8. These highly ideologically inflected reflections published in the essay *Through the Revolution to Art: Through Art to the Revolution* (1933) may also have been motivated by a desire for rehabilitation after the Mexican debacle and in the context of the increasing grip of Stalin over artistic and political life in the USSR during Eisenstein's years of absence from Russia.

9. The 1923 essay "Montage of Attractions" drew on his experience with the Proletkult production of Ostrovsky's play *Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man* which pioneered the use of the projected film sequence within the staging of the play. As he concludes the most appropriate school for the montageur is cinema (and also music-hall and circus).

10. The post Rodchenko held at VKhUTEMAS was that of deputy dean of the metalworking department and it was within this craft department with its strong productivist steer, that he developed the teaching of photography.

11. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema" in: *Movies and Methods. An Anthology*, edited by Bill Nichols, Berkeley: University of California Press 1976, pp 44-64.

12. A review of the back copies of the house journal of the theoretically inflected film studies, *Screen* reveals that over the forty odd years of its existence only a handful of articles dealing with the teaching of film and media practice have been published despite the fact that the journal had its origins in 1952 in the Society of Film Teachers' journal, *The Film Teacher* (the SFT became the Society for Education in Film and Television

and its journal changed its name to *Screen Education.* *Screen Education* evolved into *Screen* in 1969 and quickly shed its interest in practice concerns.

13. In contemporary educational discourse, children who suffer dyspraxia are unable to fully develop their motor skills, language and thought processes. Consequently, they appear clumsy and awkward, and have difficulty with simple tasks. This seems like a good description of the engagement of film theorists with the tasks of creative practice.

14. See Nightingale AW *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

15. Noël Burch seeks to delineate a critical practice that engages fully with the materiality of film practice seen as simultaneously constrained by and in opposition to the dominant forms of film production. His *Theory of Film Practice* (1973) , interestingly enough titled *Praxis du Cinéma* in its French edition, remains an exemplary derived from and confirmed by the perception that " film develops not through the constraints and conventions of an industry, but in opposition to them."

16. As Sohn-Rethel following Thompson argues, 'the real abstraction operating in exchange engenders the ideal abstraction basic to Greek philosophy and to modern science.' (p28)

17. As Lukács writes in *History and Class Consciousness*:

> If we follow the path taken by labour in its development from the handicrafts via cooperation and manufacture to machine industry we can see a continuous trend towards greater rationalisation, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker. On the one hand, the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialised operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialised set of actions.

18. It has been argued that the basis of the academicization of art lay as much in the privileging of the role of narrative within painting and the later elaboration of a hierarchy of genres in painting, in which the history painting was the most prized, as in the perspectival revolution with its mathematical concerns.

19. Habermas's predominant approach to understanding the relationship of theory and practice is not however primarily a historical one. He seeks to identify the specific knowledge interests informing our modes of theory. These interests are seen as operating at a transcendental level and organise our experience on an *a priori* basis and prior to all scientific activity. This philosophical anthropology spurns Kantian formulations of the transcendental without really clarifying its status and the formulation of the knowledge - power nexus provided by Michel Foucault seems a more appropriate conceptualization of the *historical a priori* as 'orders of discourse'.

20. As I have noted elsewhere (Bell 2006) we have all learned to talk the talk, and the talk is a sub-positivist discourse of 'research questions', data collection', milestones and deliverables where the researchers is expected to effectively describe the outcomes of their research before they have actually undertaken it!

21. Despite an awareness that the hermeneutical approach rests on a historical tradition of exegetical scholarship focused on the interpretation of texts rather than patterns of behaviour, and despite his abiding interest in language and communication, Habermas's account focuses on action rather than on discourse, and on the interpretative understanding of social action rather than the deconstruction of texts. In the 1970s Habermas is primarily concerned with a critique of the drift towards behaviourism and systems theory in the social sciences rather than with the modes of critical reading of texts that begin to inform film theory. In the hands of Talcott Parsons and later Niklas Luhman, the so called "action frame of reference" became assimilated into systems theory with its practical application envisaged as achieved through the social policy interventions of the welfare capitalist state and this is the object of Habermas's attack.

22. The attempt by the current coalition government in the UK to privatise higher education, has been accompanied by an attack on the academic credibility of a range of creative and performing subject areas in the advanced secondary school curriculum. There is a move to ensure that the most prestigious British universities, the so called 'Russell Group' institutions, will no longer accept Advanced Level secondary

qualifications (A levels) in photography, drama, media and film studies and a range of other subjects with practice elements, giving priority to students who have taken traditional science and arts subjects. These creative and performing arts have found themselves on the wrong side of the division between manual and intellectual labour.

23. Lord Leitch 'Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills' (examines the UK's long-term skills needs) London: HM Treasury, December 2006.

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