

# CREATIVE PARAMETERS: REIMAGINING FILM PRACTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

How should film education relate to the film industry? How do we encourage students to become reflective practitioners? How can film's practices be assessed? Unpacking these questions is key to understanding film education and how it might develop. In this paper we will offer some observations and suggest some answers that are born of our experience, teaching on MA Film Practice, Arts University Bournemouth.

These questions directly arose when re-designing AUB's MA Film Production in 2018.<sup>1</sup> This re-drafting aimed to make the course more level appropriate and critically aware, which led to changing its title from Film Production to Film Practice, which sign-posted a shift to a more authorial practice-based research model, this also emphasized that practicing (thinking in and through the medium) is an essential part of the partitioner's process.

The Master's course recognises individuals and their aspirations, and celebrates ideas, making, and creative risk-taking. Our guiding principle is to offer distinctive, exciting and challenging opportunities for you to engage in your respective subject disciplines in order to critically engage with, and redefine, your particular approaches to your practices and position them within your chosen external, creative, economic, and cultural environment.

'Programme Specification,' Film Practice MA, Arts University Bournemouth<sup>2</sup>

The course's first year coincided with the Coronavirus pandemic and its accompanying lockdown, which forced learning delivery to be rethought, but also offered an opportunity to explore different ways of teaching. The MA Film Practice's adoption of a reflexive methodology meant we were able to adapt to remote learning without fundamentally altering our aims and objectives. For instance, we instigated Sense of Place, a project in which students, in their respective home countries, were asked to explore their own locked-down environments. The students worked in pairs, and the final piece, one minute in duration, was a coming together of both points-of-view. These works were hosted on a designated webpage, so the work could be discussed (via Zoom) and this also ensured that the project's legacy was captured.

The pandemic emphasized that conditions change, that there is a need to be flexible, therefore 'soft' and 'transferable' skills<sup>3</sup> are key learning objectives that have transferable cross-disciplinary application. For instance, this was confirmed by the conclusions of Google's Project Oxygen:

'[It] shocked everyone by concluding that, among the eight most important qualities of Google's top employees, STEM expertise comes in dead last. The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of

one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas.'<sup>4</sup>

At that time, the course's next project was to be One Plus One, which was designed with 'creative parameters' that aimed to challenge production and budgetary inflation and focus authorial intention. In this the students were asked (amongst other things):

*When is a moment best led by image or sound?*

*When should a shot be cut? When should another shot be added?*

*How does framing aid storytelling? What makes camera movement meaningful?*

*What does soundscape add? When is dialogue required?*

*How do production details (e.g. props, costume) relate intentions?*<sup>5</sup>

These questions were further developed, as the course evolved, and this can be seen in the current One Plus One configuration, which will be discussed later. This approach helped to facilitate highly individual Resolution projects, which was particularly gratifying considering the conditions.<sup>6</sup> This experience proved the methodology's worth (to students and staff alike) and hastened the course's adoption of this way of thinking and making.

We first wrote about this in 'Questions of Imagination and Process'<sup>7</sup> as part of a broader consideration of the film industry's future in the light of the climate emergency, and wanted to return to it, to examine it in more detail. Our perspective may be a partial one, but we believe it can be part of an instructive discourse that can develop a critical position, an empowering pedagogy that can accentuate student voices and further new practices.



Figure 1. Tringle, Peter Engelmann (Resolution project, 2021)

### **Art and Technology**

Film is a coming together of art and technology. This formulation can be seen in all forms of production, whether popular or experimental, fiction or non-fiction based. In this there is a tension between perceived industry norms and critical engagement, which has social, political and cultural dimensions.

On most British film courses the technical is privileged, as it can produce recognizable results, which are seen to be directly equatable to employability. This approach is born of a normative definition of

filmmaking, a marketable form that invokes the allure of mainstream productions, and pedagogic ‘pragmatism’, which often manifests as an unwillingness to re-think established models. Therefore, it might be imagined that graduates would be industry ready, but this is not the case, as there is an entry level skills gap,<sup>8</sup> which indicates that this model should only ever be one aspect of a learning experience.

In our previously mentioned paper, we suggested that the digitization of the workplace and workflow could potentially ‘democratize’ production, however ‘the lack of any discernible change in the film industry demography has demonstrated how technology itself is not enough to determine a shift within such entrenched structures’;<sup>9</sup> an outlook that is often reiterated through the teaching of film.

The film industry can undoubtedly offer opportunities, but there are profound issues, for instance its lack of sustainability, problematic ethics, monocultural representation and non-diversity, with ‘who you know’ still remaining a ‘significant barrier’ for individuals ‘from under-represented groups’;<sup>10</sup> something that British Film Institute acknowledges,<sup>11</sup> but responses have been largely top-down, which needs to be reversed; this point can be levelled at many industries, creative and otherwise, but arguably film is a unique cultural enterprise, with its hierarchical practices and industrial processes being well known, which should make them all the more interrogatable. However, in film education there are complimentary alternatives, which can offer adaptable and applicable practice related experiences.



Figure 2. *Solastalgia*, Alice Papadacci (Resolution project, 2022)

### Complimentary Resources

The art and technology dialectic can create a false distinction between research and making when in fact they are part of the same action; Peter Wollen, film theorist and historian, writes, ‘In an ideal world, production students would have a solid grounding in history and theory, just as academic

students should have a grounding in production. But will it ever happen?’<sup>12</sup> Further to this, Victor Burgin, educator and artist, observes that ‘a large part of the routine work of artists is a work of research,’<sup>13</sup> which defines and harnesses applicable creative processes.

Being reflective practitioners, we endeavour to embody on-going transformative awareness,<sup>14</sup> in which our experience and learning informs our own development. Therefore, we actively aim to create a discursive space that is ‘produced at the confluence of students, programme content’ and staff,<sup>15</sup> which is a site of ‘co-presence’<sup>16</sup> that allows different voices to be heard, that considers learners have ‘distinctive point[s] of view, based on existing knowledge and values’,<sup>17</sup> in which staff have an ‘openness to the unfamiliar.’<sup>18</sup> This views teaching as a ‘collaborative enterprise’ that ‘engages innovation to transform knowledge’<sup>19</sup> for the benefit of students and staff alike.

Creative research aims to develop an awareness of specific forms of knowledge, which allows students to become ‘knowledge producers’, rather than consumers, actively engaged in ‘problem solving.’<sup>20</sup> When considering this situation, the debates around creative practice-based research degrees are instructive. This endeavour is framed through an ‘active’ engagement with ‘knowledge building’,<sup>21</sup> where the ‘conversation’ centers on the ‘material objects’ of art production, and emphasizes the importance of both conversational parties, maker and supervisor.<sup>22</sup> This academic space ‘is dynamic’ and is always being (re)created and ‘filled with constellations of connections’ and is an ‘incubator for risk taking.’<sup>23</sup> In this space staff must be open to different student perspectives, whilst offering a contextualizing and supportive presence.

In this reflective environment learning is a dialogue, part of an ongoing discourse, in which ‘the process of knowing and community within which the learning is situated are inextricably intertwined.’<sup>24</sup> An inter-connected cohort reinforces the individual’s growth, which also enhances awareness of and commitment to other members of the group and their activities. Therefore, a course’s ‘worth’, in this respect, can be judged by the conditions it offers and its staff’s commitment to this approach. Also, as academics we are required to regularly assess our ‘performance’ - through peer-to-peer, internal assessment, external examination – and this feedback contributed to our understanding and the course’s evolution.

### **Creative Strategies**

On a one year course there needs to be primary and secondary objectives; we emphasize authorial vision and its innovative articulation. However, it is important to recognise that there is no automatic discounting of established industry methods and practices. So, we encourage an approach of Adopt-Question-Adapt: Adopt, because there are industrial tools and techniques that aid all film making practices; Question, because equally there are problematic issues - inclusivity, creativity, social responsibility etc.; Adapt, endeavouring to make these practices fit for emerging practitioners.

This approach has many different and overlapping elements. One such being the deconstructing of viewing and reading lists. Received filmic canons have their place, as lists of filmic acclaim, but this accounting so often has ignored important works. In order to get away from the presumptive notion of ‘best’ we have instigated an alternative method of categorization, which offers evolving thematic collections – Concerning Representation, Concerning Making, Concerning Perspective, Concerning Remembrance, Concerning Society, Concerning Place – each list is chronological and consists of ten-fifteen works. This same method was also applied to the reading list. This challenges filmic perception, making film history more approachable and current, reiterating that interests and forms change and evolve, that history and context are open to interpretation. These collections offer suggestions, which complement existing formulations, and indicate that students, staff, enthusiasts, makers (whoever they may be), critics all play a part in constituting perceived importance and developing awareness, because ‘theory is often the foundation of practice, just as film-making is often

an outcome of film-theory’,<sup>25</sup> and situating the students actively in this debate is a vital part of their emerging practice.



Figure 3. *Queer Self-Portrait with Friends*, Beñat Uribe-Echebarria with Vendula Korsová (Resolution project, 2022)

The course is composed of three units – Strategies for Practice, Masters 1: Research, Masters 2: Resolution – that offer a clear learning pathway. Each of the units has a major project attached to it, and they are all designed according to the same complementary principles. In this model only the Resolution project is considered a ‘film’, every creative activity before this is an ‘exercise’, because this allows for more creative openness and deconstructs received technical hierarchies, for instance using mobile phones to film and record material. This emphasizes the importance of language, the need to develop cross-cultural definitions that allow active interpretation, which, for instance, transforms *what a film is* into *what is a film?*

### Essential Exercises

Art as Inspiration is the first unit’s major project. It consists of four exercises that combine to make a complete work. It starts with a research relevant artistic reference, which directly inspires the first exercise:

1. *Essential Image* - what can you create & communicate with a single (moving) image, what do we need to see and why do we need to see it?
2. *Essential Image and Sound* - what can sound provide us with that the image cannot, how do we mobilize sounds unique characteristics in our creative work?
3. *Essential Image, Sound and Movement* - what does movement add, when should a camera be still and when should it be active, how does its animation affect the frame, further composition, assist a narrative?
4. *Essential Edit* - what’s the creative and communicative purpose of your final assembly, how does it relate to your research?

This process reinforces the focused application of research, in which details and meanings build towards a singular outcome and encourages self-awareness.

One Plus One is the second unit's major project. But before this occurs the students present their research Resolution proposals. Their projects can take on any form or genre, but they must relate to their evolving research and be economic in thought and deed.

A Research Resolution proposal must relate the project's conceptual and creative drive, the connection to research, its ambition (the scale and budget must be considered and realistic), and mode of presentation (will it be shown in a cinema or installed in a gallery etc.) These projects must adhere to creative parameters, for instance drama proposals' need to carefully consider their staging:

1. *Script* - a maximum of eight pages (film duration ten minutes).
2. *Actors* - ideally two (no more than four).
3. *Location* - a maximum of two main off campus sites; if proposing a studio production, the set must be modular (shared with the other studio bound projects).
4. *Conception* - all projects to be situated in the contemporary realm; any historic representation must be clearly linked to research.
5. *Further logistics* - no children, animals, weapons, stunts.

Each student project is offered seed funding by the course and encouraged to Crowdfund the any remaining funds that their project may require. Also, the students have access to the university's considerable resources – professional standard film kit, studios and post-production facilities, crew (drawn from both BA and MA film related courses), technicians, and other courses (e.g. Modelmaking, Animation and VFX). All of which asks: how is your research going to be made manifest? And what will make it distinctly yours?

To facilitate personal answers the students, engage with One Plus One. This project addresses conceptual processes, it consists of four related components that come together in a performative presentation. It challenges the students to 'sound-out ideas, visualize resonance, think beyond words', giving them 'the opportunity to interpret, re-imagine and re-present' their research, which allows their ideas to develop in unexpected ways across and between different forms. One Plus One consists of four related components that culminate in a ten minute presentation:

1. *An Image* - the essence of your production in stilled time; it should encapsulate your perspective, the emotion, feeling, narrative that you are representing; it can be a collage, drawn, painted or photographic (analogue or digital); it can examine texture, shadow, movement, but it cannot feature figurative scenes, portraiture.
2. *Soundscape* - the audio essence of your proposed project, it can feature voices, but no scripted scenes or non-original music.
3. *Colourscape* - what is the project's visual register when expressed colour treatment, a sequential colour and light presentation that 'tells the story'.
4. *Spatial Presence* - how do you see your project? How can it be located in three dimensions?

We want the students to think and re-think, make and re-make, to consider what is the essence of their proposed activity, to be authentic, resourceful and collaborative, for instance, if they intend to produce a studio based production their plans must be modular, sharing resources with other such projects.

The Resolution Project is the culmination of the students' research. The course's practices may have shaped their approach, but the outcome is determined by individual intent.

Creative parameters are versatile, unrestricting, potentially expansive; they are tools to question and focus intentions that place a different emphasis on technical and production demands, which allow imaginative and differentiated forms of applied research to emerge. This process proposes that the individual learner will discover through the programme of study what they need, and what they discover is what they needed at that time, for the answer to *what is a film?* should always be relational

and interpretive.<sup>26</sup> This may be the end of their Masters' but their practice, in all respects, will continue to evolve, as they do, and all they have been part of will aid this progression.

## CONCLUSION

'When I came to AUB for my MA I transformed as a filmmaker, and throughout the process, the course team let me (and highly encouraged me) to experiment, to think outside the box while I'm exploring my idea and how I could make it work; I truly believe that I couldn't have done it anywhere else.' Peter Engelmann, MA Film Practice Graduate<sup>27</sup>

We have tried to design and be part of an aware and supportive environment, that promotes personal research and applied experimentation. Some Resolution films are surprising, redolent with seemingly fresh insight, whilst others are more recognisable works, but they have all gone through the same process - finding creative research resolutions through the application of creative parameters - and their final form is evidence of their exploratory journey.



Figure 4. *Indelible*, Charlotte Howard (*One Plus One*, 2022)

Many courses make great play of their staff's industry experience, but film courses are not the industry. Technical training can, sometimes, directly open career pathways. Our critique does not negate the importance of such teaching, for this will always be attractive, but it would reiterate that there are different ways of considering film and its purpose. Therefore, we would emphasise critical thinking, which positions film as a varied international socio-cultural phenomenon, and the importance of being a reflective and reflexive practitioner; an approach that can also enhance an individual's employability, as they become an active part of the world in which they practice.

The industry requires an able workforce, but these individuals can offer more than educated willingness, they can be part of its evolution towards a more engaged, sustainable, and accountable environment. History suggests that by degrees some refocusing will occur, in accordance with changing attitudes and procedural innovation, but when change is a necessity it can happen quickly,

for instance in response to the lockdown production companies rushed to devise new working protocols to ensure that the industry did not shut down completely, which demonstrated that this production model can be adaptable and change if it needs to.<sup>28</sup>

Learning initiatives are endeavouring to become more inclusive and diverse, to tell different stories, and this is where the future of the industry should lie. But these activities need to be bolder. They need to address the assumptions that permeate the industry, and question its practice, for knowledge of process and possibility will make it more approachable, allow new voices to be heard and influence its development.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The MA Film Production course was re-written and reconstituted as Film Practice by Andrew Vallance and Jonathan Carr, who at that time were Senior Lecturer, Film Theory and History, and BA Film Production Course Leader.

<sup>2</sup> 'MA Film Practice Programme Specification,' Arts University Bournemouth, accessed October 15, 2022. <https://aub.ac.uk/graduate-courses/ma-film-practice#tab-1126285-course-outline>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ashwin et al, *Reflective Teaching in Higher Education*, ed. Andrew Pollard and Amy Pollard, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 353.

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Strauss, 'The surprising thing Google learned about its employees – and what it means for today's students', Washington Post, December 20, 2017, accessed August 20 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/20/the-surprising-thing-google-learned-about-its-employees-and-what-it-means-for-todays-students/>

We are indebted to our colleague Clare Cahill for sharing this article.

<sup>5</sup> Our colleague Ronald Gow was integral to the creation of creative parameters and course's adoption of them.

<sup>6</sup> Three examples of positive outcomes are Lukas Steinmaier's *Sunday Roast*, which won the Royal Television Society (Southern) Award for Student Comedy and Entertainment (2022), Karim Ouri's *Isle of Sien*, which won Lyon Young Film Festival's Documentary Award (2022) and Peter Engelmann's *Triangle*, which won the RTS (National) Award for Postgrad Writing award (2022). Winning, or not winning, awards does not reflect the worth of a course, however this form of recognition is meaningful to the students.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Vallance and Robert Hardcastle, 'Questions of Imagination and Process: The Potential of Film Practice Pedagogy to Challenge Existing Modes of Production in the Context of the Climate Emergency,' *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, 10: 1-2, (2022).

<sup>8</sup> Seetha Kumar, 'Upskilling the UK's Creative Industries,' *New Statesman (Spotlight Skills Supplement)*, July, (2017), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Vallance and Hardcastle, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Kumar, 21.

<sup>11</sup> 'Employment in the film industry,' BFI Research and Statistics, August 17, 2017, accessed August 23, 2021. <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-employment-in-the-film-industry-2017-08-30.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Theory and practice,' *Journal of Media Practice*, 6:2, (2005): 74.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Burgin, 'Thoughts on "Research" Degrees in Visual Arts Departments,' *Journal of Media Practice*, 7:2, (2006): 105.

<sup>14</sup> Sigridur Halldorsdottir, 'Quality Attributes and Competencies for Transformative Teaching: A Theory of the Transformative Teacher', in *Quality Enhancement of University Teaching and Learning*, ed. Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney and Paul Bartholomew, (Farrington, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing 2013), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Bell, 'Negotiating and Nurturing: Challenging Staff and Student Perspectives of Academic Reading,' in *Learning Development in Higher Education*, ed. Peter Hartley, John Hilsdon and Christine Keenan, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 146.

<sup>16</sup> Ashwin, 238

<sup>17</sup> Saul McLeod, 'Constructivism as a theory for teaching and learning,' *Simply Psychology* (2019), accessed November 8, 2022. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/constructivism.html>

<sup>18</sup> Engels-Schwarzpaul, 1260.

<sup>19</sup> Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney and Paul Bartholomew, 'Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Quality Enhancement in Higher Education.' in *Quality Enhancement of University Teaching and Learning*, ed. Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney and Paul Bartholomew, (Farrington, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing 2013), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Isabel Huet, Ana Vitoria Baptista and Clara Ferreira, 'Developing undergraduate students' generic competencies through research actives,' in *Quality Enhancement of University Teaching and Learning*, ed. Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney and Paul Bartholomew, (Farrington, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2013), 157.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Christina Engels-Schwarzpaul, 'The Ignorant Supervisor: About common worlds, epistemological modesty and distributed knowledge,' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47:12 (2015): 1254.

<sup>22</sup> Engels-Schwarzpaul, 1259.

<sup>23</sup> Craig Batty and Marsha Berry, 'Constellations and connections: the playful space of the creative practice research degree,' *Journal of Media Practice*, 16:3, (2015): 181-2.

<sup>24</sup> Ashwin, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Wollen, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Gough-Brady. 'Using film as both embodied research and explication in a creative practice PhD,' *Media Practice and Education*, (2019): 67.

<sup>27</sup> '36 Questions, Three Strangers, One Dark Question,' Arts University Bournemouth, (2022), accessed on November 15, 2022.

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<sup>28</sup> We discuss this in more detail in the previously referenced 'Questions of Imagination and Process.'

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