

**RMIT University**

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**The screenwriting PhD: creative practice, critical theory and contributing to knowledge**

Abstract:

This article explores ‘the exegesis now’ from the perspective of the screenwriting practice PhD. Using as a playful homage to traditional screenplay structure, the archetypal Hero’s Journey, it maps the landscape and offers examples of how the screenwriting exegesis/dissertation is occurring at RMIT University. This includes a comedy feature film about gender and perspective; a multiple-protagonist feature film set in the world of avid *Doctor Who* fans; and a hybrid form, the screen novel, set in the politically corrupt world of contemporary Melbourne transport infrastructure. Guided by their supervisor ‘mentor’, two candidates and one recent graduate embark on a collaborative journey that probes, prods, prides open and proposes what the screenwriting practice PhD can do and look like, and by doing so raise important points about the purpose and form of the dissertation. Collectively, the authors assume the simultaneous roles of the candidate who is doing, completing and has completed; the experienced supervisor; and the in-training supervisor.

Biographical notes:

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Dr Stayci Taylor’s publishing and teaching interests are screenwriting, creative writing, gender, comedy and the web series. She is an Industry Fellow in RMIT University’s

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Screenwriting – Screenplay – Creative practice research – Exegesis

## **Introduction: screenwriting and the PhD**

Writing on creative writing research in 2005, Arnold states: ‘Clearly, the debate between “academic writing” and “the other” is far from over and for many people still quite unresolved’ (2005: 3). Twelve years later we might assume there to be much more certainty in the discipline and, given the volume of scholarship produced, that questions of academic writing vs. creative research writing are for the main part resolved. However, even as this special issue highlights, while broadly there is a shared understanding of definitions and practices, specifically there are individual nuances and flavours that sometimes lead to misunderstandings – and worse, disagreements. Examples include practice-led and practice-based (does ‘to lead’ mean something else than ‘to be based upon’?); practice as a verb (process) and practice as a noun (product); and creative writing as a method (so what is the methodology?) vs. creative writing as a methodology (so what are the methods?).

In this article, we explore ‘the exegesis now’ from the perspective of the screenwriting practice PhD, a relative newcomer to the academy when compared with the creative writing or media practice PhD. There is a growing body of scholarly work that argues for screenwriting and screenplays as significant research practices and artefacts, irrespective of their production potential (see Baker 2013, Baker et al. 2015, Batty and Baker 2017). Situated both comfortably and awkwardly between the disciplines of creative writing and screen production, screenwriting draws from and offers much to both. For example, a survey of recently completed doctorates reveals that while some projects situate themselves neatly within creative writing and speak to this discipline (situating and contributing, the methodology employed), others draw more heavily from screen studies and contribute ideas more relevant to that discipline. Perhaps the more interesting ones combine both, developing a clear and distinctive screenwriting methodology.

A strong and recent argument made by scholars and practitioner-researchers is that screenplays can and should be seen as finished creative works in their own right (see Batty et al. 2016, Boon 2008, Macdonald 2010), and that both the *practice of screenwriting* and the *form of the screenplay* can be questioned, contested and expanded when subjected to research incubation. The two special issues of *TEXT*, on scriptwriting as creative writing research (2013, 2015), point to this in the form of 19 published stage plays and screenplays with supporting research statements (both components double-blind refereed) that position them as contributing to knowledge. In the same vein, Ted Nannicelli argues that screenplays can be understood as ‘ontologically autonomous works’ (2013: 135), which perhaps rings true for those screenwriters working in the academy who are trying to maintain both a creative and research practice. Thankfully for those working in the discipline, we are now seeing multiple opportunities to embrace screenwriting as a legitimate, exciting and truly original mode of research, and none more so than in the space of the PhD.

Using as a playful homage to traditional screenplay structure, the archetypal Hero’s Journey, here we map the landscape of the screenwriting practice PhD and offer examples of how the exegesis/dissertation is occurring at RMIT University. Guided by their supervisor ‘mentor’ – though fully acknowledging that the mentor also has lessons

to learn, more often than not from his ‘mentees’ – two candidates and one recent graduate (who is also training to become a supervisor) embark on a collaborative journey that probes, prods, prises open and proposes what the screenwriting practice PhD can do and look like, and by doing so raise important points about the purpose and form of the dissertation.

Stephen is a final year full-time PhD candidate writing a screen novel, a form that draws from both screenwriting and prose fiction to create a new way in which a screen idea (see Macdonald 2013) can be presented and consumed. A stand-alone artefact as well as a pre-cursor to the script development process, the screen novel is written in a way that privileges authorial voice and has command of story, character, world and theme, while also nodding to aspects that would usually be found in a screenplay, such as slugline (time and location), casting and setting, and directorial qualities like camera shots and scene transitions. The screen novel, *Coyne*, is intended as a six-part television series dealing with political corruption in contemporary Melbourne, in particular the infamous ‘white elephant’, the East West Link. Kathryn is a part-time, mid-candidature PhD researcher who is drawing on the world of *Doctor Who* fandom (her own lived experience) to develop a screenplay that uses character to explore ideas of identity. Employing a multiple protagonist structure centred around a chance meeting at a *Doctor Who* fan convention, the screenplay (tentatively titled *Whovians*) uses a series of character arcs to illuminate the key themes arising from the research into fandom, including participation in cosplay, collecting and online communities. As will be outlined, Kathryn’s PhD employs a research-led practice approach that is mirrored in the overall structure of the work. Stayci completed her screenwriting practice PhD in 2016, for which she researched gender, comedy and script development. Concerned with how a writer might implant perspective on the screenplay page, her PhD took a gendered approach to screenwriting practice and ultimately argued that by using the second-person point-of-view in a screenplay’s scene text, either as a script development exercise or in the final draft, a female perspective can be inscribed not only by the content and themes of a story, but also by the way that story is written via screen directions and dialogue. Her female-centred comedy screenplay is set in an alternate reality where gender biases are reversed.

Collectively, the candidates and their supervisor discuss the role and form of the dissertation in the screenwriting practice PhD as conceived of at their university. They assume the simultaneous roles of the candidate who is doing, completing and has completed; the experienced supervisor; and the in-training supervisor. As a note on terminology, at RMIT University the word ‘dissertation’ was employed in 2015 to replace the word ‘exegesis’, which it was felt was potentially limiting for the types of project being undertaken within the institution (see also Baker 2014: 45). As such, while this Special Issue is titled ‘The Exegesis Now’, when discussing our work we use the term ‘dissertation’ but use ‘exegesis’ when those we are citing call it such.

### **Ordinary world: who are the candidates and what were their beginnings?**

Stephen is currently in the final year of his PhD and has come to frame his approach to research as an act of discovery: a ‘make and reflect model’ that, Webb observes,

‘involves concentration, a conscious act of drawing on established knowledge; time spent evaluating and testing the alternatives; and thinking consciously about your own process’ (2015: 120). He points out, however, that this approach to research is not resulting in a simple ‘reflective journal’ dissertation that will accompany his screen novel, what Krauth describes as ‘*this-is-how-I-wrote-my-creative-piece*’ (2011: 8, original emphasis). Stephen’s dissertation is more holistic than that, drawing on critical theories, analyses of similar works, and reflections on his own creative experiments to develop new knowledge about both the form and the fields within which the screen novel is situated (see also Forbes 2014: 275). The dissertation is therefore outward facing – for use by other practitioners and scholars – rather than inward looking, only talking about itself and its author for the purposes of self-understanding.

After completing a Bachelor of Professional Writing, Kathryn decided to tackle a ‘creative thesis’ approach to research with her Honours degree, before taking a detour through a coursework-based Master of Screenwriting, then coming back to the creative thesis approach with her PhD. While Fletcher and Mann (2004) define the creative thesis simply – a creative work plus an exegesis – sometimes simplicity is not enough. Kathryn spent her first year struggling with methodology, and used much of her time trying to find a ‘best fit’ model for how the screenplay might speak to, emanate from, and/or be situated alongside the dissertation. For Woodrow there is ‘general agreement that the exegesis must place the studio project in an historical and contemporary theoretical context’ (2008: 2), but as with Stephen’s warning against the ‘diary’ approach, in what ways might this placing happen; and for what effects?

Kathryn turned to Kroll (2004), an experienced researcher and supervisor who understands the chaos that surrounds the written component of a research degree: ‘The variety of terms employed to describe the academic part of the thesis reveals the slippery nature of the beast as well’. There is a question of whether the exegesis even has a place in creative research. For example, Fletcher and Mann (2004) discuss that ‘if creative research was really to be seen as *creative research*, then it should not need this legitimating device’. Woodrow argues that the results of research should be evident in the submitted (creative) work, and notes that ‘this burden is constantly being placed on the exegesis’ (2008: 2). Alluding to the fear that a creative work might not stand up in its own right as a contribution to knowledge, Brady (2000) suggests the purpose of the written component is as a kind of ‘security blanket’. This led Kathryn to question what the purpose of her dissertation might be – including its intended readership beyond the examiner – and perhaps more crucially, how the screenplay would ‘do’ research in its own right, not merely sit pretty alongside the academic writing.

Stayci’s PhD was awarded in November 2016, described by her in the introduction as taking the form of a screenplay and accompanying two-part dissertation. As a new candidate in 2013, she was still far from settling on the presentation of the research and was not yet familiar with terms such as ‘research design’ and ‘critical framework’. At that time, however, she did anticipate an experimental approach; quite sure that both the screenplay and the exegesis (or dissertation as it would later come to be known) would depart from more traditional formats, perhaps even be combined as one artefact. This was a far cry from the practice she had developed prior to entering the academy, which included working as a writer and storyliner for long-running television series,

and co-creating and writing a sitcom for broadcast television. The PhD would be a space in which to play (Batty and Berry 2015).

### **Call to adventure: first attempts at questioning and doing**

Faced with the world of undertaking creative practice research in screenwriting, one of Stephen's first questions was: what is the role of the dissertation? Also looking to Fletcher and Mann's work on the exegesis, which specifically surveyed those working in the visual arts, the notion that the purpose and fabric of a dissertation is not 'uniformly and clearly articulated' (2004: 5) was simultaneously challenging and full of potential. If creative practice research is 'concerned with improving and/or innovating practice, and by doing so also creating new knowledge about practice drawn from an insider's perspective' (Batty and Berry 2015: 184), then this supplementary question arose: what might the screenwriting dissertation look like in order to fulfil its project-specific purpose?

While screenwriting practice research is much less developed than its sister fields of creative writing and media practice, there are a number of recent discussions of this mode of research entering academic discourse. These discussions include the position and purpose of screenwriting in the academy (see Baker 2013, Baker et al. 2015, Batty 2016), and in the research degree context specifically, how its form might offer flexibility for integration of the creative and the critical (see Sawtell 2016). For Batty and McAulay, 'Screenwriting is an emerging research practice within the academy, whereby *the act of writing a screenplay* is understood as a form of research' (2016: 1, emphasis in original). They draw on Harper's (2007) work on creative writing research to contextualise the 'academic screenplay' in terms of *capability* and *knowledgeability*: research about practice that then informs practice, resulting in a 'knowing screenplay' (Batty and McAulay 2016).

Stephen wanted to use the practice of writing his screen novel as a source of knowledge, and so decided that the creative artefact would operate as a method of research inquiry, reflected upon and contextualised within existing knowledge about similar practices in the dissertation. In this way, his journey began proper once he knew how the creative artefact would arise and how it would inform the content and form of the dissertation (i.e., a practice-led approach to research).

Kathryn disregarded qualitative and quantitative methodologies as unsuitable for her project almost immediately. On the surface may sound like an obvious thing – who would use these in creative writing research anyway? – but there are candidates at our university using such approaches to their creative work, including participatory methods for writing prose and algorithmic systems for creating poetry. Kathryn's personal experience of the PhD topic was also an important driver, and she considered how this might shape the form and content of the eventual dissertation. For example, if notions of performativity and identity are integral to her participation in the *Doctor Who* community, how might these be interrogated in a way that would celebrate her personal, subjective positioning as researcher-practitioner-fan?

Kathryn found the reflective practice methodology a good starting point, but after a few drafts of the creative outline of the screenplay, which included reflective annotations responding to the content, this approach did not feel wholly comfortable: creative and critical aspects did not feel cohesive, and reflection was felt to border on nauseating naval gazing that was bereft of academic rigour (see Forbes 2014: 273). At this juncture, it was time to take stock and think both creatively and strategically: how might the two parts of the PhD hang together in way that is authentic to the form (screenwriting) and meets the scholarly needs of a PhD? It was here that discussions of what the ‘academic screenplay’ might look like took place with her supervisors, which considered the dissertation as an academic account capable of providing context for interpreting the creative work, and at the same time a scholarly work that spoke to the discipline of screenwriting in interesting ways.

In Kathryn’s PhD the dissertation does not take the form of a thesis per se, nor is it pure analysis of the creative work. Drawing on Arnold’s suggestion that the exegesis is evolving into a ‘more reflective piece of writing in which the contribution to knowledge becomes insights into the individual creative process with reference to ideas in the relevant literature’ (2005: 6), Kathryn’s PhD mirrors the three-act nature of traditional screenplay structure and moves through that structure using academic, reflective and creative modes of research. The middle section/act (Part 2), which focuses on decision-making and highlighting how theory has influenced practice, takes the form of a hybrid, annotated film treatment that draws from research on fandom, identity and performativity (Part 1), and explains how this informed character and story choices for the development of what will be a feature film screenplay (Part 3).

One of the many surprises arising from Stayci’s doctoral journey was that her PhD would eventually take a form that adapted, rather than disrupted, the more conventional ‘creative-plus-critical’ type of approach seen in many creative writing (and other practice-based) PhDs (see Boyd 2009). While this was something that emerged during the PhD, influenced in part by a developed confidence in methodology, she was mindful throughout of minimising the distinction between creative and critical explorations; or at the very least keeping them in constant conversation, eager that the ‘innovation or new knowledge’ produced be found not only ‘in the theme or content that the script presents’, but also ‘in the structure of the work’ (Baker 2013: 4). While not knowing yet what the dissertation would look like, she understood its function was to facilitate her thinking *through* the screenplay, enabling her to embrace the academic space as one within which to broaden, deepen and expand her extant practice (see Batty et al. 2016: 150).

### **Refusal of the call: when things get harder before they get easier**

While all the candidates here were drawn to particular methodologies and approaches that seemed to fit, further reading would often raise counter ideas and issues that would be the source of constant negotiation. For example, while there are clear, non-negotiable expectations of scholarly rigour within the PhD, Arnold argues that tethering the creative work to an existing body of knowledge seems to be an ‘incredibly stilted and an excessively definitive model that subsumes the creative component into

academic research model verification practices' (2005: 38). Similarly, Nelson suggests that the strained relationship between academic writing and creative work means that 'more often than not, we create a rhetorical text to convince the reader that the conceits of the creative work are topical and necessary' (2004: 2).

Perhaps we have moved beyond these debates, which are over 10 years old, but it is interesting to note these authors' concerns regarding modes and models of academic research. In a way, they seem to be suggesting that creative writing/practice research is not academic research; that it is something else, positioned within the academy but needing to be prised away from our understanding of academic research. Collectively, we argue that the creative work is not problematically tethered to existing knowledge because it is this very understanding of existing knowledge that makes the creative work a *creative research work*. Similarly, the relationship between creative and academic writing should not be strained: rather, there should be a delicate balance between the two, and they should always interact or co-exist. We are concerned here with creative writing research, not creative practice that is later the subject of re-contextualisation within a research infrastructure.

It is the close and necessary relationship between creative artefact and critical reflection that informed Stephen's decision to bring his two texts together, resulting in a single document that moves through his journey of researching, writing, reflecting on and re-writing the screen novel (similar to Kathryn's three-act structure). This is not always the case in the creative practice PhD, and is certainly not the case in most of the screenwriting practice research degrees completed thus far (internationally). As Kroll notes, there can be a quandary for the examiner as to how to read the creative practice thesis: 'Do they read the creative product first and then the exegesis or do they reverse the order?' (2004: 3). In Stephen's PhD, the creative artefact is purposely positioned in the middle of the 'thesis', allowing the examiner to first understand the theoretical and practical contexts of the work; second read the work and see/read these ideas in action; and third gain insights into how he reflected on and refined the work further on the basis of both research and practice.

Kathryn came to the conclusion that without the dissertation, the creative artefact is left without context. She is influenced by Krauth (2002), who discusses how writing an exegesis 'orientates the writer, the written and the read'; and also by Brady (2000), who takes this a step further by suggesting that 'If we take the exegesis as the accompanying document to a creative work, the needs to *explain or direct* the reading, or *illustrate* skills in literary analyses, fade from essential components into possible components' (emphasis in original). While Brady believes the exegesis as a situational device 'sits uneasily' with the creative artefact, Kroll (2004) suggests that the exegesis usefully reveals 'how the creative work has been affected by and measures up to past and contemporary theory and practice'.

There seems to be a tension here – one that reaches far beyond Brady and Kroll, and into the literature more generally – that seems to hinge on the purpose of the exegesis/dissertation, and accordingly its content. Does it have to be literary or screen studies in nature, or can it be something else? Is this decision driven by institutional policy, supervisor taste or candidate desire – or a combination of these factors? For



Kathryn, the creative artefact is an illustration of the research in the way that story and character design arose from research. Unlike Stephen's reflective, practice-led approach, we might see this more as research-led practice (see Smith and Dean 2009). The screenplay thus embodies and performs the research, and the structure of the PhD – with the creative work at the end (Part 3) – reflects this.

### **Meeting research mentors and crossing research thresholds**

As a practitioner-researcher, Stephen embarked on his PhD journey to deepen and expand his understanding of the craft of screenwriting. As Webb notes, 'Research practices can invigorate writing; [and] creative practices can invigorate research' (2015: 2). As such, Stephen views his creative practice research journey as a continual negotiation between writing the creative artefact and analysing the creative process, resulting in a distinctive contribution to new knowledge *about practice*. It is this concept of 'contribution to knowledge' that becomes pertinent in discussions of the dissertation, namely in relation to where new knowledge can be found: in the dissertation, in the creative work, or in both?

Nelson (2004) points out that the traditional idea of contribution to knowledge had been re-defined at his university (Monash, Australia) to describe the exegesis as a 'conceptual background' to the creative work (cited in Arnold 2005: 38). He states that in this re-definition, the exegesis makes a 'cultural contribution of substantial significance ... [and] cannot disappoint the higher charter of the creative work' (Nelson 2004: 3). In this case the researcher is not required to situate their work in epistemological terms, which raises the question: if the exegesis merely provides a background to the work, is the creative artefact the only aspect that contributes to knowledge? If this is the case, is the exegesis merely *descriptive*, not *analytical* and thus also contributing to knowledge?

Baker's point that if doctoral candidates understand their field 'adequately – that is, if they know the literature, the context, relevant critical and historical material – and understand where their project is located in relation to that, they are in a good position to find the gap in that field' (2014: 34). This puts pressure on the exegesis/dissertation to earn its place in the thesis, forming an integral part of the contribution rather than being a mere precursor to it. Here we are similarly reminded of the restrictive reflective practice approach, which can often be read as a simplistic 'make the work and tell us what you did' method (see also Krauth, above). Also from Baker, the danger with this approach is that 'candidates can be advised along paths that distort behaviours and produce narrow and constrained outcomes' (2014: 45).

On the contrary to what Nelson describes, Stephen's expectations of the dissertation were met very much through an understanding of the 'epistemological preliminaries' of research, which are outlined by Webb as such:

First a process of reflecting on and evaluating our personal values and assumptions, and how these inflect the principles, focus and approach of the work we intend to accomplish; and then the alignment of question, field of research, approach and method. (2015: 50)

If these epistemological concerns influence the overall PhD, they clearly play out in the dissertation, too. In this way, the dissertation for Stephen can be understood as a meta narrative within which the research and practice play out simultaneously; it is not, as Nelson alludes to, simply a pre-cursor or background statement.

Kathryn looked to Biggs for advice on what a successful PhD needs to include: ‘The indicators are that there are explicit research questions, that it is clear what methods are being used and why, and that the outcomes of the research are disseminated to others’ (2004). Contribution to a field of knowledge/practice is one of the most important considerations, and there has been a widely-held belief in the creative arts that it is the dissertation that essentially ‘proves’ the overall worthiness of the PhD. While the authors of this article strongly believe the creative work also contains knowledge and thus offers a contribution to knowledge/practice, it is perhaps no surprise that the dissertation is commonly viewed as ‘the key’ because a) it can usually be understood by those outside of the discipline (i.e. a universal, text-based articulation of ideas), and b) it provides clear arguments and justifications for those arguments, which is less performative than in the creative artefact. Krauth laments the potential of the dissertation when he writes that ‘Exegetic activity provides opportunity for postgraduate writers to “speak twice” about the literary nerves of their work, about the creative mechanisms driving it, and about the personal and cultural orientations that inform and frame and guide it’ (2002).

Describing her own PhD process of writing a novel, Brady states: ‘The academic became the creative; the creative became the academic’ (2000). This is something Kathryn finds occurring more often in her own research. Her original position of seeing the dissertation and creative artefact as individual but linked parts has been challenged as she has progressed, and the key lynchpin of this can be found in the second act (Part 2) of her PhD: the hybrid, annotated film treatment. While Part 1 begins as one might expect of traditional academic writing, comprising scholarly chapters that guide the reader through methodological choices and academic theories, Part 2 expands the traditional form/style of the film treatment to include annotations that situate the reader between the realms of academic and creative to understand of Kathryn’s process. Part 3 will then be the completed screenplay, which while illustrating the research that led to its creation and thus functioning as a creative research output, stands alone without comment. In this PhD, then, the dissertation shifts register from traditional to creative/hybrid, ultimately paving the way for the screenplay as the core creative outcome of the research.

Stacy’s research explored the funny, female perspective in mainstream comedy screenplays, and teased out a proposition that marginalised perspectives (which, as she argued, the funny, female perspective is one) may be vulnerable in script development to the centripetal force that is the default, so-called universal perspective. She had planned to identify and test the dominant models of screenwriting – for example, the three-act structure endorsed by Syd Field (2003) and others, or the hero’s journey (Vogler 2007) – in search of obstacles to funny, female perspectives. Thus, her aim was to develop a premise and run it through the assembly line of a variety of frameworks in the hope of uncovering something tangible that could be addressed by way of a new set of principles. It was going to be a systematic, iterative process that

generated multiple versions of the screenplay and thus uncovered evidence of a default universal perspective.

In fact, the number of models she explored in depth was exactly one: comic sequencing as outlined by Keith Giglio (2012), and almost certainly derived from the work of Paul Gulino (2004). This exercise took her on a long, messy, creative journey full of dead ends, thrilling breakthroughs, blind corners, multiple drafts and discarded treasures. The resulting female-centred comedy screenplay was presented in the industry standard format, conforming to those page margins, font (12-point Courier) and layout where ‘it is required to demonstrate the mechanisms by which it may be realised within its target medium in terms prescribed within the conventions’ (Price 2010: 112). This would have been disappointing news for the slightly younger self who began her candidature believing ‘There is no substantive reason for stage or screen scripts to be formatted in these highly specific ways’ (Baker 2013: 2), sure that her research would disrupt such orthodoxies.

She makes these points because believing ‘each creative research project develops a methodology specific to itself’ (Bolt, MacNeill and Ednie-Brown 2014: 91) means accepting that the initial visions for one’s dissertation will have to change through the process – and for the dissertation, there should also be flexibility. Once it became apparent to Stayci that her approach was not simply, as she had believed it would be, a ‘critical examination of creative choice making’ (Jacey 2010: 16), it became equally apparent that it would be cumbersome and unnecessary to include the meticulously kept records of her creative process in the dissertation. The PhD was no longer purely interested in reflecting on her process; rather, it wanted (or needed) to be a piece of research that offered new knowledge to the practice of screenwriting more broadly. Knowledge would exist in the dissertation *and* the screenplay.

### **Tests, allies and enemies: the long stretch of the research journey**

Stephen’s research asks: how might a screen idea be developed using novelistic concepts? The dissertation has given him a platform to ask questions that not only inform his practice, but also add to his experience as a researcher-in-training. These questions include: what have others said about the screenplay? What tools and resources are available to the fiction writer? Where does his research fit within these domains? What prejudices and values does he bring to the research question? As well as giving Stephen a benchmark from which to frame and negotiate his research, resulting in enhanced ‘knowledgeability’ and ‘capability’ in the field, they also propelled him to read more widely and think more deeply. The link between critical and creative elements of the research started to make sense through a deeper understanding of the epistemological preliminaries of the project. This would not have been possible with a simple ‘diary’ or ‘background’ approach to the dissertation, as written about above.

As an example, critical investigation of the form being developed brought his attention to the illustrated novel and photo-novel, which triggered an interest in using image within his screen novel. The tradition of the film novel (Packard 2011) and the literary scenario (Belodubrovskaya 2016), which dates back to the early twentieth-century,

were also researched widely and resulted in not just mere background context, but rather a clear point of departure from which his work makes a contribution to knowledge/practice.

The hybrid, annotated film treatment in Kathryn's PhD allows her to examine the creative choices she made developing the screenplay, and in turn herself becoming part of the research. This is an example of what Krauth (2002) calls the 'exegetical process in action'; exposing, through the dissertation, the relationship between one's writing and the cultures and contexts within which it sits. In other words, theory in practice and practice in theory. At times Kathryn considers herself the protagonist of the research. She wants something (i.e. to answer the research question) and there are obstacles in the way that both challenge and reward her (e.g. narrowing the research criteria, finding an appropriate methodology, reading and synthesising relevant sources). By journey's end there will hopefully be growth and change (i.e. providing a contribution to the field, earning the title of Dr).

This idea is further complicated and/or enhanced by the fact that Kathryn's research is about fandom, and she herself is a fan of the source text of the PhD, *Doctor Who*. It is here that Kathryn has drawn on the work of 'acafans' such as Jenkins (2012) and Larsen and Zubernis (2013) to contextualise her research approach. Like Stephen's admission of the dissertation deepening his awareness of what it means to be a researcher, this discipline-specific, scholarly framing assists Kathryn in her development as a researcher, providing as it does the foundations for reflecting on the process of doing research, specifically the opportunities and limitations for putting the 'self' into the PhD. This is not dissimilar to the area of autoethnography, which is common in creative writing research (see Pace 2012).

While Stayci chose the overarching term 'creative practice' to describe her methodology, so as to encompass the different ways in which the research facilitated the practice and vice versa, the approach most closely reflected what Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean term 'research-led practice', an idea less 'forcefully pursued' than the reverse notion (practice-led research) in which 'academic research can lead to creative practice' (2009: 2). Understanding thus that knowledge can/should be found in the creative artefact as well as in the dissertation, this distinction of terms informed the aspect of Stayci's research design that was the bifurcated dissertation, which was wrapped around the screenplay.

Put specifically, the PhD research was presented in three parts that she called 'Exposition', 'Screenplay' and 'Reversal'. Structuring the research into three parts was a deliberate allusion to the three-act paradigm that, as noted previously, dominates mainstream screenwriting practice and to which her screenplay conformed. It was hoped this would not be misconstrued as a glib gesture, but rather a considered decision as part of maintaining an emphasis on creative practice as a research methodology, and of keeping the screenplay at the core of the research project. Parts 1 and 3 – 'Exposition' and 'Reversal' – were offered as somewhat of a 'before' and 'after' of the research process. In other words, Part 1 outlined the research informing the creative practice: discussing the research terrain; the elements that formed its parameters; the circumstances by which the PhD came about; and describing the scholarly and

discursive landscape within which the research resides; while Part 3 reflected on the insights arising from this, and how they were performed through the screenplay.

The titles of the two separate (yet very much connected) components of Stayci's dissertation were designed to reflect the relationship between theory and practice, especially as it pertains to screenwriting. Part 1 (Exposition) was named for the term in fiction writing that describes information pertinent to the narrative about events that occurred prior to its commencement (hence: the 'before'). It drew in particular from what David Bordwell, discussing fiction film narrative, demarcates as 'preliminary and concentrated exposition' and hoped to lay similarly 'solid grounds for confident hypothesis formation' (1985: 56). Part 3 (Reversal), which followed the screenplay, also borrowed its title from screenwriting. A succinct definition of a reversal 'is a beat [change in action] that is unexpected and takes the story into an unforeseen direction' (Peterson and Nicolosi 2015: 95). It is also a comedy term, used similarly to describe the art of taking 'out of context what the audience expects to create an unanticipated result [for comic effect]' (Duncan 2008: 152). This notion of surprise was pertinent to this section of her PhD, which functioned as something of a third act.

The beginning of Act 3 in the sequencing screenwriting model sometimes introduces 'new and even more difficult problems, sometimes forcing the character to work against his or her previous objectives' a result of which 'the story is sometimes turned upside-down and we glimpse it from a very new angle' (Gulino 2004: 17). It was in the third year of her candidature when Stayci realised the alternative reality narrative she was exploring was more key to the research project as a whole than she had previously thought. In fact, she had enlisted the device almost arbitrarily, as a way of incorporating those same gendered biases she was critiquing, but without cognisance of its centrality to her search for techniques in writing marginalised (specifically, female) perspectives. Thus, this realisation set her on a new path of investigation, whereby she sought a more dedicated definition for the particular practice she was engaged with – one that ultimately led, through that particular *content*, to her experiments with screenwriting *form*.

### **Conclusion: reaping research rewards and returning with new knowledge**

The journey for these candidates started at different times in their careers and lives, on different research footings, and for different purposes; yet they are all arriving at the same destination as their supervisor did some years earlier. That is, a realisation that creative and critical work not only inform each other, but in fact in combination comprise one work that provides a singular thesis; that while the dissertation must be rigorous and contain new knowledge in and of itself, it can be playful and be presented how it needs to be presented in relation to the screenplay that is central to the investigation; the space between creative writing and screen production can be useful for screenwriting in its attempt to define itself as a discrete discipline, one that nonetheless has a strong relationship with writing and production, where the dissertation can be used to ask new questions and provide original insights; and that with a deep understanding that the screenplay performs research findings as well as being a source for reflection on practice, there is a true transition from practitioner to

practitioner-researcher, one who can write creatively and critically in equal measures – sometimes on the same page.

In preparing his final submission, Stephen has integrated creative and analytical writing to be structured in three parts: Part 1, Introduction; Part 2, The Creative Work; and Part 3, The Reflection. In this way, the reader is asked to follow his own research trajectory: discovering discussing existing bodies of knowledge; applying that synthesised knowledge to frame the creative work; and then reflection on the creative work in a critical and interpretive manner. This approach highlights the distinctive yet complementary voices that can play out in a creative practice PhD (see Kroll 2004: 2). For Stephen, it has been important to integrate creative work and critical writing because it reinforces the idea that creative practice research is a combination of creative and critical elements, not one plus the other. In this way, his dissertation clearly spells out ‘a conscious and well articulated awareness of the research practices in evidence in the creative work’ (Bourke and Neilsen 2004: 3).

Stephen considers that new knowledge exists in both the creative work and the analysis of that work, and suggests that ‘the nexus of the creative and the exegetical work is not whether one speaks to an aesthetic quality, industry or artistic satisfaction or one speaks to the academy, but how they might co-exist and inform one another’ (Lee et al. 2015: 93). Taking a hermeneutic approach to the creative artefact has allowed Stephen to reflect on, analyse and interpret the research process via the dissertation. As Krauth neatly summarises in relation to this integrated approach to knowledge discovery and dissemination: ‘The creative product pushes the culture forward; the exegesis provides an analysis of the reasons why, [from a writer’s point of view]’ (2002: 5).

In the conception and development of her screenplay, Kathryn is deliberately writing from the heart: *Doctor Who* fandom is a world she knows well and practices daily. However, it was recognising what she needed to focus on in the creative artefact – what the screenplay needed to do as a result of researching for the dissertation – that the synthesis of theory and practice truly began to take shape and have meaning. Harrison suggests that ‘For story-tellers, during certain phases of composition, an avoidance of self-conscious technique might offer needed emotional space, as well as possibilities of textual discovery; however, artistry in fiction means skilfully realizing informed expressive choices’ (2003). It is this notion of informed expressive choice – practice-based manoeuvres that are influenced by research – that describes Kathryn’s research-led practice methodology, which is resulting in a dissertation that feels authentic to the form (screenwriting), speaks truthfully about the research process, and satisfies the needs of academic rigour.

Where Brady sees that ‘The academic and the creative slid into one another, nestled side by side so that one fed on the other, one became the other’ (2000), for Kathryn there is also a symbiotic relationship between the screenplay and the dissertation, perhaps best exemplified in the form of the annotated story treatment. The three-act structure of the work feels fitting for the discipline, especially the theoretical concepts and reflective thinking that can be integrated into the whole. Following the journey of Kathryn’s research process, from academic to academic-creative to creative, shifts the

focus of the dissertation from a critical *explanation* of the creative work to a creative-critical *driving force* that results in the creative work.

It transpired that the narrative content of Stayci's screenplay explicitly articulated her research findings. This reflected her intentions to keep critical and creative practices in close conversation, and was also consistent with her interest in the overlaps and interplay between research (in the traditional sense) and the practice of screenwriting. However, she notes how it can be difficult to convincingly articulate different approaches to creative practice and have these understood in disciplines (such as creative writing) where reflective practice might be the expected (sole) methodology. It is only looking back on her PhD now that she realises her changing approach to the critical component inadvertently mirrored our university's change from exegesis (a critical explanation or interpretation of a text) to dissertation (a long essay on a particular subject). While Stayci's dissertation *draws from* her practice, it is not necessarily *about* her practice; rather, it discusses the practice of screenwriting more broadly, as *informed by* her own processes undertaken throughout the PhD.

That by the end of her candidature she was submitting a dissertation, rather than an exegesis, was technically no more than a matter of timing; but it transpired to be much more accurate. 'The iterative aspect of the process', as Nicola Boyd writes, 'returns the [creative practice] researcher again and again to reposition and remap their "conceptual terrain" more precisely over time' (2010: 139). This was Stayci's experience of creating not only a PhD screenplay, but also a screenwriting PhD dissertation – an exercise in repositioning and remapping according to the research, the practice and their ever-changing relationships with each other.

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