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The creative screen production sector in Australia now

This special issue of *TEXT* collects selected papers delivered at the 2010 Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) Conference held at the University of Technology, Sydney in July of that year. The papers range from theorising how to engage with international students in our courses to occupational health and safety issues for the screen production industry and for our students; to studies of our own creative research practice as media producers; and to theoretical articles on such issues as documentary ethics, three dimensional imaging and new directions in music video. Many articles combine theoretical analysis with reflective studies of the author's (or authors') own creative research. This is the type of praxis/pedagogy research mix we are involved in as a sector within Australian universities—work and teaching issues, practice based creative research and theoretical analysis of media forms and individual creative works.

The disparity between researchers in the creative arts and those in the traditional humanities has become increasingly stark in recent years. Practitioners in the creative arts in Australian academia have long known the difficulties in having their outputs counted, let alone valued, by their own institutions, professional bodies and instruments of government (in terms of both funding and assessment). A policy shift in Canberra during the last decade promoted the auditing of national research outcomes, with the bi-product of humanities “practice led research” entering the debate.

Over the past six years, ASPERA representatives have met and lobbied a variety of political/ministerial advisors and agencies including the Department of Education Science and Training, Australian Research Council, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, and federal and state screen funding bodies. The recent public release of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) results, as a national snapshot of the creative arts in relation to other humanities research, is compelling reading. A close analysis of the statistics confirms a number of trends and biases our sector has foregrounded to policy makers in the Howard, Rudd and Gillard governments.

Yet the ERA findings have some very good news for ASPERA that vindicates much of our lobbying agenda (see, http://www.arc.gov.au/era/outcomes_2010.htm). The Fields of Research (FoR) most relevant to our discipline's scholarly and creative outputs are 1902: Film, Television & Digital Media, 2001: Communication & Media Studies and, to some degree, 2002: Cultural Studies. Within FoR 1902, more than half

(54%) of the assessed research was classified as Non Traditional Research Outputs (NTRO). This was the also the case for the majority of the two-digit ERA cluster 19: Studies in Creative Arts & Writing. In contrast with the more traditional humanities, NTROs account for only 3% of outputs in both Communication & Media Studies and Cultural Studies.

Impressively, 86% of the Film, Television & Digital Media research outputs were “rated at or above world standard” with the vast majority of institutions achieving a score of 3, slightly above the National Average Rating (2.9). Only one institution, the University of New South Wales (with a number of media production courses and staff over two campuses including the College of Fine Arts) scored a 5, connoting world leadership. Only one other university, Victoria College of the Arts/University of Melbourne, scored a 4, above both World Standard and the National Average.

In terms of staffing, ASPERA has long claimed that our discipline is undervalued by our respective institutions, particularly in relation to academic promotion and professional advancement. Irrespective of the historical data, our employers systemically value traditional research outputs above NTRO and often compose their promotion panels devoid of creative arts peers. Hence, it should surprise no-one in ASPERA that the ERA data reveals that for 1902: Film, Television and Digital Media only 4.5% of full-time staff are at level E (full Professors) and 8.5% at level D (Associate Professors). In contrast, our creative arts peers in Cluster 19 have more than 10% of staff as full Professors. In allied disciplines, the disparity is far worse. In Cultural Studies, for example, 22% of all full-time staff are Professors or Associate Professors.

It is little wonder that fewer staff in 1901 attain the official ERA ‘esteem’ benchmarks via the fellowship of esteemed national academies (e.g. Humanities and Social Sciences) and other measures. Aside from Journalism and Professional Writing (FoR 1903), our sector has the lowest ‘esteem’ rating per head of full-time staff, which is far excelled by esteem indicators in Art Theory & Criticism (FoR 1901), Performing Arts & Creative Writing (FoR 1904) and Visual Arts and Crafts (FoR 1905). In Cultural Studies, esteem ratings are given to a substantial 12.5% of full-time academics in the discipline. The ERA has now introduced Australia Council fellowships and grants as indicators of ‘esteem’. While ASPERA congratulates this overdue recognition, we wonder when the same benchmark will be applied to recipients of, for example, nationally competitive peer-reviewed Screen Australia or State film-funding body grants, or the establishment of equivalent fellowships for screen media academics long deemed ineligible for Australia Council awards?

Similarly, the annual Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) process remains stubbornly wedded to traditional indicators of research via printed textual outcomes, despite the ERA innovation in creative arts assessment. As an urgent matter of research and scholarly equity, the Federal Government must recognise peer publication of screen NTROs alongside other research based creative arts outputs, many of which reach national and international audiences in the thousands, if not millions.

These outputs are plentiful and this TEXT Special Issue provides an overview of the current research undertaken by those in our national screen production and research association. We hope you enjoy this collection and find these articles enlightening.