

Review of Symposium on Lens-Based Research Practice: New Directions
30-31 March 2007, CTRMP DIT

by AVPhD Administrator and practice-led researcher Zemirah Moffat

Last weekend Tony Downmunt and I had the pleasure of attending the first AVPhD supported event outside of London. The Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice (CTRMP), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), together with the Media Research Institute (MRI), University of Ulster put together two days of presentations that examined lens-based practices and brought together researchers from masters students to tenured professors. It was well attended with over eighty of the 120 who had signed up attending (equivalent to AVPhD1 and AVPhD3), and with each session having between forty and sixty delegates.

The stated aims of the symposium were to:

- facilitate critical exchange and comparative debate on lens-based research practice for both research supervisors and postgraduates and to build cross-border partnerships with educational, media and research agencies, associated with the expanding field of practice-based research in film, photography and multimedia.
- examine how research is methodologically conducted through lens-based media practice and to identify the merits of lens-based practice in social research and its contribution to the production of new knowledge across transdisciplinary fields of study.

The symposium was designed according to three core thematic presentations that seemed most pertinent to the organising bodies: 1) the politics of representation and material cultures; 2) the construction/exploration of archival formations; 3) and the epistemological challenge of representing embodied knowledge, memory and the senses.

The symposium was also the site to launch a newly formed cross-border Consortium on Creative and Critical Practice (CCCCP) made up of CTRMP, MRI, Film and Imaging Studies, Queens University, Belfast and Huston Film and Digital Media School, National University of Ireland, Galway). CCCC's aims are to:

1. Provide a forum for discussion of the appropriate methodologies that might inform the conduct of the PhD via creative practice in the lens and screen-based field
2. Suggest models of good practice in this area for both students and supervisors;
3. Run training workshops aimed at both students and supervisors where research skills and supervisory competencies might be acquired;
4. Promote curricular exchange at the postgraduate level between institutions throughout the island, including research methods training for the creative disciplines;
5. Provide conference and exhibition opportunities for doctoral candidates to present their work and have it critiqued;

6. Encourage cross-border collaborative project work by PhD candidates and their supervisors;
7. Provide a web site with a bulletin board and an archiving section hosting examples of PhD practice both written and image based;
8. Seek to secure support, both within participating institutions and from external funding agencies for our work including: the running of symposium and workshops, cross-border curricular exchange and collaborative project work, web site and publicity activity, and scholarship support for doctoral candidates in the field.

So these were there aims and objectives and now I shall try and relate what it was like as a regular punter.

Friday began with welcome addresses from Áine O'Brien (DIT) and Cahal McLaughlin (MRI). What became clear from Áine's introduction was the importance of the cross-border exchange in the current political climate – a climate where there is much funding available for any attempts to heal the north/south divide. This came up again and again throughout the two days. She also stressed the need for critical research into mediated exchanges. The keynotes, she said, were meant to be in dialogue with practice, even if they didn't address practice directly (one of my misgivings on the first day). She also brought up a particular distinction between practice based arts and design, and lens based media. I'm not clear on the distinction myself, but I got the impression it referred more to inter-department politics than to theoretical concerns. Finally she emphasised that the network was about collaboration from the bottom up and that these two days were to begin the dialogue.

Cahal (MRI) welcomed both the range of students and funding agencies that had come. He hoped that the conference would tease out both the theoretical issues and pragmatics of doing a PhD, and would lay foundations for a network of ideas, resources and people. The key point was the politics of representation and the relationship between the academy and society. He also introduces *The Journal of Media Practice and ScreenWorks*, hoped that an entire issue will come out of this symposium in the future.

Tony and I were then invited to introduce ourselves and give a blurb on AVPhD, which we obviously did with pomp and panache.

The day really began with a presentation by the four partners in CCIP. This was followed by a genius stroke of a panel of funding bodies. I shall just summarise what each said – I have asked every speaker for copies of their papers which I will post on the website as and when I receive them.

Des Bell Film and Imaging Studies, Queens University, Belfast began:

- He described the idea behind consortium, interest in pursuing lens based practice. Interest in providing something for undergrads/ma to continue, particularly

innovative practices that push formal bounds. There were no formal rules or guidelines in Ireland, although nothing formally restrictive.

- He emphasised that it was the students that pushed the agenda, with the consortium's aim to provide a framework, that it certainly wasn't an exclusive club.
- Explore conventions, function of website and colloquia is at very least to relieve student anxiety. There is a shortage of people who have followed this path. Hope to be able to provide support for supervisors
- Promote curricular exchange
- North-South collaborations are the order of the day. Enhancement of cross-border academic and artistic collaborations – pushing hopefully at an open funding door
- Hoping to launch a website – online consortium support
- Raised idea that AVPhD have a mission to communicate with the public. Saw PhDs as not being esoteric ivory tower activities.
- AVPhD/lens based media observations – they're an intersection/collision of various discipline (as opposite to art establishment) – cultural studies, anthropology, media studies,

2) Alan Grossman, Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, Dublin Institute of Technology

- Discussed the history of DIT (begun 2004) and it's annual 3 week summer school hosted with Allen Feldman from NYU (who gave a talk Sat) Annual 3 week summerschool

3) Cahal McLaughlin, Media Research Institute, University of Ulster;

- Asked how can we engage with the wider society? University of Ulster have a range of doctoral programmes – prison, memory, archive – contestation of history – how can you find ways of telling stories that can be listened to? Idea of creating a much bigger archive and record a larger number of people.
- Cahal will be supervising doctoral students in this project
- Stress negotiation on every level student-supervisor, institution etc.

4) Rod Stoneman, Huston Film and Digital Media School, National University of Ireland, Galway

- Marks this period as a sea change in academia. The issue of the combination of analysis and creativity frankly depends on your perspective on existent media. Educational contexts have provided space where tv has closed them off
- In last few years of Houston there have been a number of MA's and there is now an MA in public advocacy and activism

Next up was the panel of funders:

1) Peter Cullen (Higher Education and Training Awards Council) – the higher education quality assurance agency

- Interested in developing shared-vision b/w stake holders of what practice based research is and in that context we have established a research project.
- Address issues of concern to prospective students, institutional level and agencies who provide funds. 1) a generic understanding of research – shared understanding of what constitutes research/scholarship; 2) what is understood by practice-based research – epistemological frameworks and methods etc; 3) frameworks of qualifications – in Ireland have framework that defines learning outcomes for a doctorate. This is a good place to start particularly when you're challenging what a doctorate is. What kind of person is a Dr? And in the UK there is an equivalent framework (check out); 4) programme structures and types – 2 broad categories: professional doctorates and practice based PhDs. So how do you structure them? Development of generic skills of doctorate candidates and life long learning, found some things better learnt in a more structured way and realisation by students that they have learnt things through practice; 5) supervision and problems of assembling supervisory teams in new areas of research; 6) presentation of research – how to capture transience that arises in this research and to leave some lasting legacy and preservation of knowledge – capturing of transience; 7) collaborations costs and benefits; 8) social and economic impact of research in this area. What we really need is examples of good practice and lots of them!
- They are currently in the primary stage of consultancy, and the next phase is to go out for second round of consultation planned for Nov this year

2) Val Conner, Irish Arts Council

- Arts council doesn't fund undergraduate work, but does engage with curriculum development.
- The Arts Council does directly support pg study by artists. 'Travel and Training Award' It is the artist who is the protagonist, all the agency is with the artist and all institutional legitimacy is ceded – An artist who has established a practice and who has been invited to have gallery exhibitions. Lense based practiced artists seem to be coming to a fore. They are probably artists who because of understanding of methodology, even where accident must be designed into process, there's a very good level of critical understanding. This is based on observation
- Focus on working conditions of artists – arts council and social inclusion, arts council has healthy debate r/e participatory arts/ community arts
- Call for assistance to articulate visual research methodology

3) Shelagh Dogerty of Arts and Humanities Research Council

- 12.5 million Euro budget
- increase in funding targeted on post graduates.
- PG scholarships funded 90 last year, hoping to fund 100-120 this year. Have ¼ rate of success. Post doc fellowship scheme, last year funded 20, this year about 30. Also have academic schemes that allow academic breaks to follow research.
- Purpose to provide placements and mobility opportunities

- Cultural studies and media seems to be increasingly popular. Traditionally have funded theoretically based research questions.
- What I'd like to get out of the day is to open up dialogue and see where gaps in funding are. It's not an area that we've traditionally funded, but are open.
- The council is to shortly sign a bilateral agreement with AHRC in UK, to fund joint workshops. Themes have yet to be agreed. But council will be writing to them for bilateral agreements

Chair, Brian O'Neill, Head of Research and Post Graduate Studies, DIT said that the opportunity to meet funders and build sustainability, and by interest shown in this event there is enormous interest shown in new modes of research.

Discussion afterwards centred around:

- How best to make the case to government funding? And which who is the appropriate agency to fund it?
- Where does one agencies remit stop and another's begin?
- responsibility on research community to bring forward proposals
- The existing guidelines in place for AVPhDs
- Who are the experts on the panels to give funding – look at process of selection on panels.

After a coffee break anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis presented *An Anthropology of the Senses – Memory, Materiality and the Archive*. It was a three part presentation, the 2 last sections being readings from her book. She talked of the anthropology of the senses, embodied knowledge and pre-articulation, advocating both an experiential and a theoretical return to the senses. After the focussed first sessions I was struggling to work out how Nadia's presentation was directly relevant to AVPhDs. In the last section she discussed a little of how she used photography in her research. I may have missed several beats in her presentation as the sessions had overrun and we were over an hour late for lunch.

After lunch we had the second thematic presentation by Roberta McGrath, (School of Creative Industries, Napier University, Edinburgh) *History Embodied: Visual Knowledge and Archives*. She discussed the sensory aspects of researching in an archive, showing us pictures of the archives throughout. She talked of photography as a connective substance and asked how can you use photographs to think.

The last two presentations of the day were for me the most useful. It was two case studies of film, photographic and installation research projects. The first was Ann Burke: *Responding to Ethnographic Photographs of the Aran Islands* (PhD Student – Media Research Institute, University of Ulster). She described her research with reference to previous ethnographers who had photographed the islanders. She then described how she went about photographing and how it acted as an elicitation tool in her research. She is planning an exhibition as part of her final thesis. The second presentation was from Mark Curran: 'The Breathing Factory: A Globalised Evocation', MPhil (graduated Dec 2005 from Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, DIT). He was given a MPhil

for what many of us decided should have been a doctorate (Tony and I thought we could have a voting section on the website “MPHil or PHD? Vote Now!”). Questions from the floor were quite practical asking about student-supervisor relations, department support etc.

Because the day was running late we had a short Q&A and then ran into a thematic panel discussion. It focused on archives, memory, questions of change of spaces and contexts/exhibition spaces. The day ended with a Reception and Launch of Consortium for Critical and Creative Practice (CCCP) at the Irish Film Institute.

Saturday was a shorter day where everyone seemed keen to stick within their time slots. It began with the third thematic presentation *Public Cultures and Action Research – Methodological Anxieties, New Challenges and Professional Futures*. It was given by Allen Feldman, Department of Culture and Communication, New York University. The presentation was entitled, *Cultural Anesthesia: From the Stratification to the Criminalization of Visibility/ Invisibility*. There was a strong focus on anthropology and the archive. Again I was left wondering as to its direct relevance to an AVPhD, but it certainly stimulated discussion afterward.

The second session were three case studies in film, photography and multi-media. Again, I found this very engaging and productive, as questions of the relationship between practice and product, as well as practical concerns from students.

- Anaele Diala Iroh (Adis): 'The Living Archive and Acts of Secrecy: Memorialising Everyday Transnational Nigerian Familial Life in Ireland', PhD Student – Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, DIT (60-80,000 words plus exhibition)
- Eamon Crudden: 'Auto Documentary Film Practices in the New Social Movements, Focusing on the Anti-capitalist Movement', PhD Student - in Film and Imaging Studies, Queens University Belfast (40-80,000 words, + 8 films)
- Ronnie Close: 'Responding to the Notion of Place in the Historical Construction of Identity in the Northern Ireland Conflict', Senior Lecturer and PhD Student – Newport School of Art, Media and Design

After lunch we had a joint session entitled *Textualizing Practice: Multiple Genres and Narrative Possibilities*.

- Tony Dowmunt, 'An Autobiographical Voice: Confession and Reflection in Video Diary Practice-Based Research', Media and Communications, Goldsmiths
- Roshini Kempadoo, 'Research as Critical Mediations: Writing and Producing the Creole in the Archive', School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies, University of East London

Chair, Alan Grossman (DIT) said we need to think far more imaginatively r/e approach to text for practice based PhD – not to make writing dull. Textual format has to emerge in response to specificity of project. He hopefully said that we're in a period of experimentation. There was a good debate later about the relationship between practice, products and politics.

The day ended on a positive and hopeful note with *Future Directions*. There was definitely the feeling that this was an opportune moment for funding or AVPhDs in Ireland, both for funding and to influence the rules and regulations.

Overall

I thought that the event was valuable and a good start for the Irish AVPhD community. It reminded me of AVPhD1, with people asking similar questions and raising similar anxieties. Although I wasn't convinced of the appropriateness of some of the longer presentations for AVPhDs, the shorter practice-led presentations were valuable.