

**Conference Report**  
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**AVPhD Regional Workshop, South Wales and South West England, 2008**  
**University Of Wales Newport**

This AVPhD workshop represented an opportunity for those involved in post-graduate research practices to come together and discuss the process, successes and problems facing them in the burgeoning field of audio-visual practice orientated doctoral studies. AV research spans various media as well as many disciplines, from film and video technologies, to performance and philosophical executions, mobile technologies in relation to consumption to digital games and evolving contemporary narratives. Despite this diversity there is a strong sense of relation between philosophies, approaches as well as trials, opportunities as well as problems.

The conference consisted of a series of keynote speakers brought in from the Academy and the Industry, and explored issues such as “The Context of AVPhD” and “How to achieve a Doctorate?”, “Technology and AVPhD”, and case studies of collaborations between University Departments and the BBC. This was interspersed with panels where PhD candidates discussed their research and where there were several running themes; documentary and ethnography, performance and aesthetics. There was also time for screenings, and performance including the screening of a film with live musical accompaniment.

The opening address, courtesy of Cambridge University’s Maureen Thomas, was a provocative general overview of trials facing practice-based and practice-led research within the Academy. Her talk resonated with the challenges posed institutionally in the current practice/research climate. By a simple dissection of the practice/theory requirements set out by Universities and the VIVA process as well as alternative distinctions set by funding bodies such as the AHRC, Maureen highlighted the ways in which we may navigate a way through practice based problems, always italicizing the importance of skill and ability combined with creativity and collaboration between partners who can bring a combination of audio visual skills and other disciplinary skills to bear on research.

The Practice/Theory and Aesthetics panel exemplified the cross-disciplinarity that is the AVPhD impetus, featuring theatrical performance, applied cinematography and more concentrated theory, yet all centre around ‘aesthetics’. Dr Andy Smith discussed the application of post-dramatic discourse in the design of performance and space, while Phil Cowan discussed Kandinski inspired colour coding in film photography. Clive Myers closed this panel by addressing the derivation of the term diegesis from its inception in ancient Greece to its adoption and increasing misuse in film studies. As a collective this panel addressed a diverse display of concept, practice and reading in the visual, whilst the question and answer session also raised issues of where the research is constituted –

within the work or the supporting documentation.

Running parallel to this panel was a session on Documentary and Memory, starting the strand of documentary and interdisciplinary social science work that has already found its place in the Academy. Eve Olney's paper was a richly textured overview of her doctoral practice-based research project surrounding the documentation of a private music collector. Her presentation was an eclectic mix of aesthetic issues, folkloristic and ethnographic approaches to documentation. Following her closely was Max Schlessor's who provided a fascinating insight into the possibilities of using mobile phone video technology for documentary. Lastly, Adnan Hadzi's paper introduced the scope of open source software and on-line distribution for user-practitioners. The panel concluded with a lively discussion which brought forth the various disciplinary discourses and approaches the three papers had raised, ranging from ethnography and folklore studies to new media practices, thus providing insight into cutting edge practice-based research into documentary.

Terry Flaxton delivered a highly physiological and technological paper on the state and reception both analogue images and high definition. Foraying into the technologies of sight that govern our relationship to images, he illustrated his talk with examples of his installation works that play with the illusion and supreme "reality effect" of cutting edge high-definition imagery. This presentation blended detailed analysis of technicalities and techno-determinism in contemporary film production with intriguing psychologies of seeing, and illuminated the potential of what he considered to be a truly revolutionizing technology.

Rowena Goldsmith representing the BBC and Claire Wardle from Cardiff University presented a session on their collaboration on user generated content, supported by the AHRC – one of several projects successfully initiated by Rowena. The team are looking at viewing habits and trying to ascertain how far user generated content is useful in democratising the media. The question arose from the floor of how far was the research into audience response a genuine quest for audiovisual democracy, and how far was it a self-serving aim of the broadcasters to gain content and market research? Claire argued succinctly that universities in such partnerships must maintain their scepticism and undertake research on ethical and focused grounds, and Rowena stressed that any partnership must be truly collaborative. It is refreshing to see this type of partnership in action; it posits a potential for future informed broadcasting and an access to the industry rarely afforded to the academy.

Day Two began with parallel sessions. Speaking on the Performance Panel, Emma Westecott discussed game play in term of performance, cogently arguing that the game-player is both audience and author; a return to a potentially more democratic and participatory form of performance. Tom Abba (University of West of England), continued this theme, by considering expanded reality games. He seeks to establish written narrative formulae for the medium of multi-user games in a manner similar to the established practices of film and television, and thus

frameworks for such extended authorship. His AHRC funded research project expanded on the theme of collaboration that emerges at the heart of the conference. The performance panel concluded with Matthew Lovett who presented a wholly diplomatic debate around the impact of recording technology on improvised musical performance, and the value systems of recorded versus live performance. The synergies of issues of improvisation versus rule bound play were not lost on the game players. Despite the divide in pursuits this panel keys into the theme of the establishment of 'traditions' in their respective fields.

The parallel session featured ethnographic researchers and this panel was composed of three papers, each examining issues of documenting migratory experiences through audio-visual media. Aparna Sharma shared the interrelations between the literature review of her thesis and the practice she developed as part of her doctoral research. Deirdre Lynch raised the issues and problematics surrounding aesthetic possibilities that arise from the eliciting discourse between ethnographers and their subjects. And finally, Veronica Vierin formed a rounded portrait of issues in documenting migrant experiences as it questioned the varied and competing discourses, including those of migrants themselves, through which such liminal experiences tend to be articulated and appropriated. The concurrent theme of this panel raised prevalent issues regarding the necessity to reclaim ethnographic observation as a practice for research.

A second collaboration between the BBC and the Academy (the University of Wales, Newport) and perhaps the most exciting of the conference, was based on the production of a documentary about the Aberfan disaster beginning with Ceri Sherlock's, (Arts Commissioner BBC Wales) paper "Aesthetics and the industry: rewind / pause / fastforward". He drew parallels with ancient Greece and argued in support of the Academy as a resource apart, a contemplative space where new knowledge can be produced to renew the more pragmatic, money driven film and TV industries. His rhetoric was very suggestive, although some of the academics, working under the pressures of contemporary higher education failed to recognise the picture he created of their lives as somehow removed from the pressures of the "real world". Nevertheless, the importance of such a positive statement of support towards the Academy from a significant figure within the BBC is extremely promising.

Following a screening of "An Artist in Aberfan", the touching film made by collaborators Anna Maria Williams, Dai Williams and Chris Morris, the makers talked about how they achieved new knowledge, in the form of the documentary, and also the original artwork by photographic artist Shimon Attie, which without the collaboration between the University and the BBC would never have come into being.

The importance of collaboration is reiterated throughout the conference, and the balance thereof. As practice based research claims its place in the Academy its balance remains uncertain and its practical elements problematically yet

definitely reliant on collaborative venture. And this concern is established in the closing discussion that resumes the concerns of the first, opening debate of the AVPhD process and analysis, from inception to Viva. Historicity is another recurring theme in this gathering, from Clive Myer's diegesis to Ceri Sherlock's narratives to the collective memories of disaster and more general student complaints of the problematic balance of practice and research. The resolve to the latter seems to be rooted in the former as the standards for practice based scholarship are based within a paradigm of traditional research that does not fit. Here the documentary and ethnographic research provided a really good example of how methodologies and procedures are becoming both viable and productive with a move to a truly interdisciplinary audio visual future. Nevertheless the conference posited interesting questions for the future of AVPhD studies and suggested a necessity for further symposium that may go in some way to resolving the tensions of such emergent work.