

SMASHING TABLES OF VALUE.

by John Cumming

“With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike.” (Thoreau, p.71)¹.

Political context: In Australian society today, that which is relatively new or innovative and that which stands as a sign of reform or reconciliation is cast out or regarded as a luxury. Administrative and policy gestures enforcing these perceptions are rife in tertiary education and ought to be considered in the context of other movements in our social fabric. The federal government’s decision not to approve funding for legal services to make native title claims (The Age, 25th March 1997 p.1)². comes to mind as a most dramatic example of the contempt for reconciliation of past injustices and for cultural progress which emanates from Commonwealth policy.

This trend is also connected to the demolition of long-standing social and democratic institutions, relations and conventions. Australia’s ability to play an active part in the cultural life of our international region will be severely undermined by the demise of funding to Radio Australia. Meanwhile our elected representatives hand-pass responsibility for such sweeping changes in our national infrastructure to economically shackled corporate executives. The long term future of our broadcasting and education systems are seen to be determined as a side-effect of administrative pragmatism. (The Age 31 March 1997 p.3)³.

The issue: At present an academic thesis may take the form of a written exegesis and a creative work but not a creative work alone. Debate about this situation would appear to be between two reactionary camps; firstly those who refuse to recognise the communicative value of visual and other non-literary forms of language and secondly, those for whom the purity and integrity of a particular creative practice and virtuosity within that practice, are sacrosanct.

Placing this issue within the political context of corporatism we can expect to find likely outcomes stemming from pragmatic and real-politic motivations in both these positions . At the level of our educational corporate executives the result of a recent review into Deetya scoring is the extinguishment of points for ”creative works” by academics. It would seem that, with across-the-board cuts to tertiary education funding, regression has been chosen as the expedient path ensuring the ‘survival of the fittest’ in the academic world. That which is apparently the longest standing and that which is seen to be most favoured by the Government/s of the day is most likely to remain standing.

Placing this issue in the educational context calls for a hypothetical anecdote:- An art historian who writes but does not paint can achieve a post-graduate qualification and secure research points for their Faculty, whilst a painter who does not write academically, but paints, achieves and secures no such favour; even if the painter's work demonstrates a deep understanding of the theory and history of art.

Personally, I believe that painter ought to know or learn how to write and to conduct some research according to established academic convention. As a matter of principle however I feel a responsibility to take the opposite side of the argument. The hegemony of the conventional academic text is no longer intellectually sustainable in an academic context. In taking this position I remain conscious of, and feel an equal degree of urgency about, the need to counter postures which, together with particular notions of 'art for arts sake' (and equally 'training' -rather than education- 'for industry's sake'), can be used to deny the place of ideology, history, theory and criticism in media or artistic production.

My purpose is to advocate scrutiny of the cultural and political status of written over visual and other forms of language, both in my particular field of filmmaking and in the wider context. The scenario above sets the stage-plan for a significant drama to be played out. Lines will be drawn and sides must be taken as there are principles at stake. Whether we like it or not, those with a commitment to education are faced with a political struggle.

"Behold the good and the just! Whom do they hate most? Him who smashes their tables of values, the breaker, the law breaker, - but he is the creator." (Nietzsche, p51.)⁴

In art, as in science, creative work by its nature seeks, at least from time to time, to challenge and even destroy established standards and convention. From the earliest formative years of Soviet cinema the most theoretically adroit practitioners were identifying and criticising the play of cultural pathology in the development of cinematic convention. Dziga Vertov decried the many genres of filmed theatre whilst theorising and practicing an altogether new approach to visual language. Yet naturalistic literary and theatrical convention continues to dominate world cinema. The concept and practice of 'writing' with film advocated by practitioners as diverse as Charles Chaplin, Vertov, Robert Bresson and Peter Watkins (not to mention numerous strictly 'experimental' filmmakers) remains undeveloped. It is explored only on the outermost fringes of our media culture and occasionally within those few educational environments in which the co-existence of a healthy critical discourse and production is actively encouraged.

Artistic production in an academic context can contribute to theoretical knowledge and should include a consciousness of context and an understanding of pertinent histories. There ought to be less discrimination about the choice of media employed in the delivery of any given thesis and more attention paid to the

development of critical faculties and modes of assessment. The effectiveness of the choice of media, the manner in which and consciousness with which it is used, together with the content and referential elements within an artistic work can be opened to analysis as they are in the written exegesis. If academic rigour is one of the criteria sought in a system of assessment and scoring, it will be achieved by acknowledging the potential of a diversity of communicative forms and by fostering the development of academic culture around 'new' and 'other' media.

There may be a lack of academic and even intellectual rigour in some artistic production areas within the University system. However this will not, in my experience, coincide so much with a lack of written exegesis as a lack of integration of theory, criticism and history with production. A system of assessment which looks for evidence of such integration in the creative works themselves, rather than in a written addendum, has the potential to throw forth a greater and more productive challenge to academics in fields such as Performance, Media, Visual Arts and Literature. Prevalent patterns in the development of course-work programmes which work against such integration include the separation of technical and creative 'training' from critical studies.

As an educationalist in the film and video production field I intend to continue to include the history, examination, analysis and critique of existing artistic works in almost every session of any course I run at an intermediate or advanced level. Such teaching practices are essential to the progressive educational traditions of courses such as Media education at the Rusden Campus of Deakin University and at the Broadway Campus of the University of Technology, Sydney.

It has been suggested that in the academic assessment of creative works the 'Community as arbiter of quality' could be invoked. There may be a number of applications for such an approach provided this, by its very nature, problematises received notions of what constitutes 'community'. Community should not equate to 'potential employer', or 'existing markets'. In some instances it may require the configuration of hybrid or hypothetical receptions. Such assessments also need to be able to be tailored around the particular stages of production of any given work. This may vary not only according to the media or artform but also according to the genre employed.

Viewed unilaterally, the challenge of securing academic recognition for artistic vision and production within the academy is a daunting task. The immediate challenge for academics in this field is to secure recognition of, and the opportunity to engage in, such a challenge. This means, for example, lobbying to have the omission of dance, film, video and multi-media productions in the ARC database rectified. Individual universities may choose to continue to support these fields, despite the prejudices inherent in DEET policy and Deetya scoring, but in the longer term national policy needs to reflect contemporary educational practice and social and cultural reality.

There has been a dangerous tendency in some papers at this conference, towards self-censorship and a kind of will to have an extrinsic and prescriptive discipline imposed at a unilateral level. This may come from the misguided belief that by getting involved in building our own cage we can secure a degree of freedom. My sense is that this impulse comes from academics steeped in production who have only recently 'been to the mountain' of conventional academic research and dissertation and have adopted an overly self-deprecating posture. It may be that these scholars have recognised certain academic inadequacies within the production education sector. However it is presumptuous to apply this realisation in the particular to the whole. There are no revelations here for those of us who have had the good fortune to be taught and teach in institutions where a sophisticated mix of theory and practice has long been the norm. At Rusden, for example, the theorisation and practice of production in the context of a critical education was one element in a holistic educational concept and philosophy.

As educationalists we ought to be working to ensure that our academic integrity and autonomy, together with that of our faculties, schools and institutions, is not eroded. We ought to be indicating to policy makers some of the progressive education directions that can be taken and working towards a national tertiary education system in which pluralism is embraced and encouraged. Difference rather than homogeneity might then form the basis for on going debate and development, in which students will play a part in as much as they now constitute a market with some degree of choice and a fair degree of sophistication in their practical understanding of these issues.

1. Thoreau, H.D., '*Walden*', Mentor Books, N.Y.,N.Y.,1959.
2. Tingle, Laura '*Strict new controls for land claims*' The Age, Melbourne, 25th March 1997.
3. Tingle, Laura '*Some Strong interference ensures the PM gets poor reception on the air waves*' The Age, Melbourne, 31 March 1997 p.3
4. Nietzsche, Fredrich, '*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*', Prt1, Prolouge #9, trans. R.J.Hollingdale, Penguin, London, 1969.