

RESEARCH COMMENTARY



The challenge of film to innovation and entrepreneurship studies

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ABSTRACT

This commentary supplements the work of a creative practice research project that generates new ways of thinking about innovation and entrepreneurial processes. Our creative method, underwritten by the logic of sensation and presented in film format, operates as an alternative form of research in these fields, where results are normally conveyed in book or journal paper. Film-based research has developed distinctive qualitative, empirical and theoretical vocabularies that can expand the nature and range of evidence, argument and expression across the broad range of innovation and entrepreneurship studies. 600 Mills, the film that accompanies this paper, is available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/08109028.2017.1336011>.

Film research

In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter (1950) reminds us how effective change within capitalism comes from entrepreneurs who have taken the initiative to do things differently. Inspired by Schumpeter's attempt to analyse economic activity from a different perspective, we depart from a conventional written paper to offer a new interpretation of his novel ideas. We emphasise the similarities between Schumpeter's analysis and the thinking on political economy of Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987). Our efforts are based on developments in research-led creative practice that see film as an important feature of research output (Candy, 2006; Smith and Dean, 2009).

Our central claim is that a film can be seen as research on innovation and entrepreneurship. Our film enhances our understanding of Schumpeter's broad vision and brings his ideas to life. Entrepreneurs attract wide attention, and academic research is expected to have reach and impact. To support our claim, we draw upon our experiences of making a research film in order to encourage thinking and insight. Film is our medium for communicating understanding of entrepreneurial innovation. This form of research-led creative practice pushes methodological boundaries and epistemic assumptions into new areas. It is precisely what *Prometheus*, as a critical journal of innovation studies, might expect of its authors.

To guarantee the validity of academic research, the apparatus for assessment and evaluation demands that a published paper be a written essay. This insistence poses problems for the intellectual development of academic research. In their investigation of 'the skew' in modern academic publishing, Macdonald and Kam (2011) note a bias favouring a narrow range of methodologies rather than new ideas and rewards for those who suggest them. This preference means that researchers who have interesting and important things to say end up speaking to each other, and those who have attempted to break the mould find themselves stifled. As a result, academics may well need to take what, at the moment, feels like a risk and look beyond immediate demand for the customary product.

Film is one of the most communicative technologies in the media landscape. It offers exciting opportunities for researchers. Increasing affordability and usability of high-quality digital recording equipment and software (cameras, camcorders, microphones and editing programs) have increased the contribution of film, video and other media presentations to knowledge, thinking and understanding across the full breadth of innovation and entrepreneurship studies (Styhre and Eriksson, 2008; Hjorth and Steyaert, 2010; Schiuma, 2011; Berkeley *et al.*, 2016). Research is not keeping pace with advances in expertise and equipment for creating and sharing film.

Is film capable of making a contribution to understanding of innovation and entrepreneurship? If it is, then certain questions arise. For example, how does film convey an argument or display understanding of a phenomenon or concept? Does film have advantages over the written word in conveying meaning and evoking response? How is film to be measured and valued as a research output? Good research stimulates (or ought to stimulate) debate about topics and issues of broad interest both within and beyond academia (Collini, 2012). Academic research findings are not usually at the forefront of social consciousness and are unlikely to bring about public engagement on their own. Can film engage people in academic research?

Film changes the nature of research because it changes how we see research, how we think about research and therefore how research is done. However, as a developing area, film-making research is not well defined. Measures to evaluate the quality of research films have proved to be vague and confusing. Technological barriers related to publishing also prevent many (though not all) business and management journals from accepting research output that includes film (Wood, 2015).

600 Mills

The authors, three academic film-makers, have been involved in writing, producing and directing a short documentary, *600 Mills* (Wood *et al.*, 2016). The film connects with discussions about how this particular form of output can be academic research (Bell, 2006; Pink, 2007; Candy, 2011; Wood and Brown, 2012; Wood, 2015; Batty, 2015; Berkeley *et al.*, 2016). The project was funded explicitly as research to be undertaken through the production of a documentary film.

Traditional documentary films can sometimes simplify multiple perspectives by rationalising them into opposing ideas to help build a single narrative around a subject. Examples are *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002), *Inside Job* (Ferguson *et al.*, 2010), *Smartest Guys in the Room* (Gibney *et al.*, 2005) and *Super-Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004). In contrast, *600 Mills* borrows techniques from poetry and performance art to allow viewers to relate not only to

ideas in the film, but also to ‘a different consciousness and sensibility’ (Bogue, 2003, p.110). The film attempts to enact and perform at the intersection of different fields of academic work and distinct modes of thinking, looking at how each comes into play and interplays. *600 Mills* is intended to be a living experience rather than something fixed once and for all.

The film is about innovation and change (seen through the work of Schumpeter and Deleuze and Guattari). It situates capitalism in the context of a local economy. It is about an industry in crisis: cheap goods manufactured in low-cost Asia pouring into Australia, and the cannibalisation of existing manufacturing. Once gone, this manufacturing cannot be recovered. The context is the decline of the textile, clothing and footwear industry in Brunswick, an inner suburb of Melbourne and once home to over 600 knitting mills. In consequence of free trade policies and globalisation, there are now around ten. But the film is also about many other things. It focuses on a number of small makers, crafters and doers (together and alone) who flourish because of their skill and ingenuity. They have grasped opportunities to do things differently.

The film engages with Schumpeter (1950) and his concept of ‘creative destruction’. Schumpeter’s description of the dynamics of capitalism as a ‘perennial gale’ of creative destruction turns upon the (apocalyptic) vision of a process that revolutionises old economic structures from within, but which, in the long run, will turn upon itself. Deleuze and Guattari see capitalism as a process of evolution that cannot be stopped. Their determination, shared with Schumpeter, is to think beyond the limits of capitalism. Indeed, the perennial gale of creative destruction bears comparison with their fugitive concept of ‘holey space’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Holey space within the context of capitalism relates to the process of passing between completely opposed forces, such as profit maximisation and unforeseen initiatives, leading to new types of innovation (e.g. Swann, 2015).

The film narrows the distance that appears to separate these thinkers, investigating their remarkable parallels. Deleuze, Guattari and Schumpeter share the same basic convictions (other than the notion that capitalism will necessarily bring itself to an end). However, re-articulating the ideas of Schumpeter or those of Deleuze and Guattari in written or spoken words is not the purpose of this film. The object is not to reveal essential facts about creative destruction. Nor does the film depend on its logic being so tightly stitched that its audience will find cohesion purely on a cognitive level. Film can be research by demonstrating or, better, producing the feelings which are aroused by those ambivalent moments of destruction and creation on screen.

First encounter

The film opens with an elevated view of Melbourne as a grid governing a series of movements across a range of intersections. The cinematic audio image orientated around these movements, its time arrangement and how it presents its sound, sets up a contemplative space (0:00”– 0:17”). This matrix is more than just representation coming or operating from outside; it asks the viewer to think, to engage in ways other than the simply cognitive. It has more to offer than just logical argument. This microcosm is evident later in the words of a Melbourne shoe-maker, who speaks about how innovation is structured by the buildings in which young innovators work. But the viewer does not know this in advance. This introductory shot simply prepares the viewer for some of the ideas to be encountered later in the film.

A disembodied voice then introduces the viewer to Schumpeter, one of the film's main inspirations. Schumpeter links many of the concerns in the introduction to the concept of wealth. The film situates this relationship within a local and contemporary context: Melbourne and the urban environment. 'Telling the story of an industrial dynamic' (0'30"–0'34"), the voice says. People walk across a street, still in bird's eye view, still along gridlines, now softened around the edges by trees blowing in the wind. The speaker reflects on moving and labouring, prompting the viewer to think about culture and behaviour, organisations and industries, and about social change associated with human progress. Another speaker, still in voice-over, suggests new ways of thinking about creativity (0'40"). He brings labour, creativity, and capitalism into close relation. Deliberately, the faces of the speakers are not shown. By focusing on the concepts and their relation to images grounded in the 'real world', the film leaves the viewer in a liminal space between the figurative and the literal. Here the film could be said to work like poetry, inviting the viewer to create new resonances.

The first few minutes of the film offer the viewer time and space to become accustomed to the relationship between the images and ideas. 'Creativity in the capitalist sense is always embodied in a product' (0'40"–0'50"), says the speaker. He is signposting an important point: creativity for Deleuze and Guattari is never fully embodied in a thing. And so the film is not concerned with things fully embodying anything, with closed meanings. The film is not a solid, not something eternal. It is rather 'the edge of newness, the feeling of liveness' (1'11"–1'15"). The viewer should not be concentrating on the ideas of Schumpeter or Deleuze and Guattari, on what the film is about, but rather experimenting with how the content-expression articulation can be experienced (Massumi, 2002).

Affective engagement

It might not seem that a film-based research project can present ideas rigorously in the way that written research can be rigorous and precise. But rigour and precision have more than one manifestation, and film offers an alternative expression. Film does not offer an argument leading to a conclusion; it has other objectives and limits.

Art, philosophy and science have a distinctive relationship to understanding and knowledge (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). Philosophy is concerned with the 'form of concept', science with the 'function of knowledge' and art with the 'force of sensation' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p.216). In other words, philosophy thinks with concepts, science thinks with functions, and art (including film) with sensations. Art, philosophy and science have always learned from one another, producing joined-up frames and interfaces in the process of enquiry.

In a related way, film-makers take ideas from philosophy and social science and attempt to produce these as sensation. Film images are not a proxy, a likeness or an expression of the things before the camera. Film offers something more immediate, more dynamic and more direct than representation. Film provides an understanding of concepts and ideas, particularly the way they are opened up by encounter with experience. In *600 Mills*, the relationship between smooth and striated space is shown in a patterning, a layering: the grid of the city, the texture of a sweater where the fibres form a grid and are also frayed (e.g. 1'26"–1'46"). The conventional research paper would find difficulty conveying this meaning with the force of sensation and affect. The film tries to remain both meaningful and affective through its exploitation of colour, framing, rhythm, sound, language – and through editing.

Film has a large compass, a complex stratum, present without being obvious. As one interviewee says, the important question is to ask not what something means, but what it does. What new capacities does film open up? *600 Mills* does not tell the viewer what we, as researchers, think. We do not simply illustrate a theoretical point or justify a theoretical claim using an argument with premises, but rather present the film as an emergent expression, not a thing. Our film is not the knowledge it contains, but its power to evoke the imagination.

Note on method

Over the course of production, people involved in textile, clothing and footwear manufacture were filmed, as were several academics and philosophers. It was important to avoid approaching the film as a simple expository work (Berkeley *et al.*, 2016). The intention was to use the cinematic qualities of the medium to convey sensations for perceiving the research, as when a felt experience produces an emotional as well as a cognitive response. The risk in this situation lay in creating a film that conveyed the dynamic relationship between intellectual knowledge and sensual experience, but did justice to neither.

Conclusion

The meaning of images is often ambiguous and the response of viewers subjective and varied (Candy, 2011). Film does not obviously meet the accepted standards of academic research. Yet, there is surely a need for academic research to investigate dimensions of affective encounter that are largely inaccessible to established research methods (Thrift, 2008). Work to identify the nature and range of films produced within the academy is widespread. These can be difficult to define and hard to measure from the viewpoint of traditional academic research.

Our aim in this commentary and film is to improve understanding of the value of film by exploring a significant entrepreneurial innovation. Can a film on innovation be academic research? *600 Mills* is valuable in that it reveals the concept of creative destruction through feeling and not just through reason. The importance the film places on ways of thinking and feeling about things provides a useful example of how this developing area of creative practice meets research criteria.

Acknowledgements

We should like to express our appreciation to Stuart Macdonald for taking a risk in supporting this work. We should also like to thank the three *Prometheus* reviewers for their insightful comments and critical engagement. This work was assisted by the RMIT Global Cities Research Institute Project Funding Program. The opinions expressed here are those of the research team and not necessarily those of the funders.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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