

RMIT University

Craig Batty

A vacuous screenplay in search of rigour

Abstract:

A university professor with a reputation for creative practice research finds himself at a crossroads when, en route to an international conference, he meets a younger and somewhat modest dementia researcher whose work is clearly having an impact on people's lives. A keynote at a creative writing conference in Hawaii, the professor is impelled to reflect on his own research practice and piece together fragments of his work history to reassure himself that what he does is not only valid as research, but also that it has rigour. With flashbacks to a variety of painful and often comic encounters with colleagues trying to articulate their practice as research, he is able to overcome his mid-flight, mid-career crisis and come to a renewed and satisfactory understanding of what *good* creative practice research is, and how that can be articulated clearly and confidently to others. Originally performed at the University of Southern Queensland's inaugural 'Scriptwriting as Research' symposium in 2016, *A Vacuous Screenplay in Search of Rigour* thus interrogates not only the very mode of creative practice research, but also the broader (and varied) institutional research cultures within which it operates.

Biographical Note:

Craig Batty is Associate Professor of Screenwriting and Creative Practice at RMIT University. He is author of over 50 books, chapters, journal articles and refereed conference proceedings; editor of two books and 10 journal special issues; and has worked as a writer and script editor. In 2016 he received an AAUT Citation for his contributions to creative writing doctoral education, and also won the inaugural RMIT Research Award for Innovative Research Supervision. His current areas of research are script development practices in the screen industry, and doctoral education in creative practice disciplines. Craig is also Adjunct Professor at Central Queensland University, and Visiting Research Fellow at the UK's Bournemouth University.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Screenwriting – Screenplay – Creative practice research – Comedy

A Vacuous Screenplay in Search of Rigour

1. INT. AEROPLANE - DAY

A manicured hand places a thin Hawaiian Airlines napkin onto a small grubby table, followed by a G&T in a plastic cup.

PROFESSOR WISE, a casually dressed yet serious looking man in his 40s, looks up and smiles at the YOUNG FEMALE MEMBER OF CABIN CREW. She hands him a small packet of nuts. Smiles, but isn't really there.

Next to Wise sits DR KO, a mid-30s stunner of a woman. She's Australian-Chinese, but has the temperament of a New Yorker.

KO

So, like, yeah. They bumped me down because they've got some kind of, like, wedding party up there.

(beat)

On points, no doubt.

WISE

Apologies if you have to endure a whole 10 hours with a dreg like me!

KO

Oh God. No. Like, sorry, shit. I didn't mean ...

Ko downs her wine. Wise laughs.

WISE

I'm joking.

(beat)

Though all things considered ...

(beat)

Let me guess, you're going to a Medical conference. You're a keynote. How to cure cancer?

KO

Dementia, actually. But, yeah.

Wise does a double take.

KO

Technically it's a symposium.

Ko presses the call bell.

KO

You? Work?

Wise quickly tries to create a convincing story.

WISE

Work. Hobby.

(beat)

Bit of both, kind of.

KO

Are you, like, a surfing dude?

Ko shakes her empty cup in the direction of the cabin crew.

WISE

Academic. Creative. Writing.

KO

Novels? I love a good book.

WISE

Scripts. Screenplays.

(beat)

Sometimes. I need to do more.

KO

And you, like, teach that stuff?

WISE

Yeah. And research. Well ...

(beat)

I guess you know about journals.

Ko snorts.

KO

One more citation and I think I'll throw up!

Wise pretends he knows what that feels like.

KO

So, Hawaii. The work 'slash' hobby thing? Tell me more.

Wise reaches under his seat and into his bag. He pulls out a hefty document - a PhD thesis.

KO

You've written a trilogy?

WISE

It's a PhD. I'm examining it. But the conference, it's about research and the creative arts.

KO

Screenwriters do PhDs?

Wise flicks through the pages dramatically - yes they do!

DR KO

And like, what are the topics? Is it serious academic stuff?

Wise surreptitiously hides the title of the PhD - 'Bronzed Zombies'.

Meanwhile, the manicured hand re-appears with Ko's wine.

WISE

Well this one, it's about how ethnic minorities have been portrayed on Australian screens.

Ko gives a look - clichéd?

WISE

But ... the gaps in representation are discussed in terms of opportunity: the potential for a counter-representation, giving voice - literally - to these ... well, pretty serious issues, right?

Ko raises her plastic glass.

DR KO

Good luck with that!

Wise suddenly looks worried.

2. INT. UNIVERSITY - SEMINAR ROOM. DAY (12 MONTHS EARLIER)

A GROUP OF ACADEMICS around a table - a full-on research discussion taking place.

Wise looks on suspiciously as DR SELF pontificates.

SELF

So I guess, if I could boil it down ... what I'm interested in ... that's to say, what I'm exploring ... both theoretically and practically, in conversation - *in praxis* - is the ways in which my practice ... how my process can be better understood to represent ... drawing on material thinking and process philosophy ... and affect ... is the way in which making as doing can create a sense of the lived experience ... As in, how we experience the world, and how the act of doing can contribute to ways of knowing through ... Like, drawing on Ingold¹ and Deleuze², figuring out how the performative act of making can tell us about the world we live in ... not just from a lived perspective, but also ... I guess ... thinking about futures and presents - and *presence* - and how material objects can exist in time and space, and in relation to one's practice, so that ... for example, a pen is only a pen because it's not a table, let's say, and so by using a pen to draw a table ...

Wise opens his laptop and decides to read e-mails instead.

3. INT. AEROPLANE - DAY

Ko is getting quite drunk. Wise, trying to read the PhD, politely distances himself from her.

KO

Impact, right? But what does that even mean? I'll tell you - *life or death!*

WISE

You mean, as a measure of ... if the research has worked?

KO

Don't get me wrong, I'm not an impact Nazi. I love a good book as much as the next Joe Bloggs. But if you can save lives and improve the financial burden of the state ... the country ...

WISE

Can't argue with that.

KO

Thought that's what you academics
did all day - argue?

Ko laughs at her own joke.

KO

I bet they're on to the cheese
board up there.

Wise goes back to reading.

Ko yanks the meals menu from out of the seat pocket.

DR KO

Jeez, when did pulled pork become
such a cliché?

4. INT. UNIVERSITY - OFFICE - DAY (12 MONTHS EARLIER)

On his computer, Wise opens a folder called 'Screenplays'. In it, dozens of files - scripts, treatments, pitches, etc.

He opens one of the scripts. Scrolls through, looking for something - anything.

He closes it and opens another file, this time a one-pager. He scans it quickly, not really taking it in.

Exasperated, he leans back in his chair. A moment. He looks around. His eyes fall on the jammed-full bookshelf.

5. INT. UNIVERSITY - CORRIDOR - DAY

Wise carries a pile of books. Research methods, philosophy, film criticism, etc. He looks determined.

As he passes a glass-walled meeting room, his eyes are drawn in. The same Group of Academics fawn over a wall full of post-it notes. In the middle, in big letters: 'WHAT IS RESEARCH?'

Distracted, Wise stumbles into a large open bin. Some of the books slide in.

6. INT. AEROPLANE - NIGHT

It's dark and most people are sleeping - including Ko, whose head is resting on the pull-down table.

Wise, reading light on, is engrossed in the PhD.

WISE

(v/o, reading)

I use the fiction screenplay 'to explore issues that are traditionally articulated by conventional forms of critical analysis', using creative structures, characters and language 'as an alternative form of academic discourse to the conventional essay'.³

Wise nods. He takes a sip of his G&T and reads on.

WISE

(v/o, reading)

As a research artefact the screenplay offers a 'richness of fictional discourse compared to conventional literary criticism' which 'creates layers of complexity that mirror [the] subject matter'.⁴ Like Berbary's 'creative analytic screenplay', *Bronzed Zombies* is a way of 'doing representation differently'.⁵

Wise stabs the page with his finger - yes!

7. INT. UNIVERSITY - SEMINAR ROOM (9 MONTHS EARLIER)

A heated debate between a SMALL GROUP OF SCREEN PRODUCTION ACADEMICS. Wise looks like he's been here a while.

PRODUCER

I had to fill out a dozen application forms for funding. Not to mention know which ones wanted what information.

(beat)

That's research!

DIRECTOR

My latest film is on YouTube.

EDITOR

What about my research into tempo and rhythm?

WISE

Ask yourself, do these works contain the research? As in, do they look -

or sound – different to what they would have if the research hadn't been done?

DIRECTOR

It's had over a hundred thousand views!

SOUND DESIGN

You can't do anything too wacky ... experimental ... otherwise nobody will want to watch the bloody thing. A festival maybe, but what about ... ?

WISE

(to Sound Design)

So, are you sticking to conventions? Doing anything with them, in an intended – *systematic* – way?

PRODUCER

Money doesn't grow on trees. You've got to know what you're doing ... you need to understand what they want. There's research in doing that.

DIRECTOR

I'm arguing for impact. A hundred thousand hits!

EDITOR

I'd say the stuff I learnt from analysing Jamaican music really did inform the editing style.

WISE

(to Editor)

That's great. Can you say who, what, how – is it replicable by others?

PRODUCER

How do Jamaican rhythms inform a documentary about second hand cars?

DIRECTOR

If I'm getting all these hits then I must be having impact.

WISE

(to Director)

YouTube hits isn't impact.⁶

DIRECTOR

Why not?

SOUND DESIGN

I can recall thousands of songs from the first three seconds. Is that research?

EDITOR

It's like when I was doing my role, in the edit suite, I was one of those musicians. Transporting their rhythms to the beat of the cut.

(beat)

Does that sound silly?

WISE

It sounds like research! The cuts and transitions are your symbolic data.⁷

DIRECTOR

I don't know why we have to talk about research like this anyway. I'm a filmmaker. With over a hundred thousand hits on YouTube!

WISE

(getting annoyed)

Hits don't equal impact! What if they hated it?

PRODUCER

Can emotion be impact?

WISE

It's what people do with it. How it makes a difference ... informs others in ways that change their practices or shift their thinking.

SOUND DESIGN

Sounds like we're all talking about different things.

Nobody can argue with that.

Wise takes a deep breath.

WISE

So, if and when - God help us - we need to frame these works as research,

we have to craft a 2000-character
research statement that clearly
articulates the background, contribution
and significance of the work.

(beat)

Of the research.

Apart from Editor, all the others look down.

8. INT. AEROPLANE - NIGHT

Wise continues to read.

WISE

(v/o, reading)

Fiction as a methodology aligns with
Stroud's argument that literary
narrative - interpreted here as fiction
- 'holds the power to move individuals
to thought, reflection, action, and
belief'⁸, possessing as it does the
cognitive qualities that allow for
subjective perspectives to be
experienced.

Ko suddenly wakes. She looks at Wise, confused - where am I?

WISE

(v/o, reading)

In short, fictional narratives,
through their various components and
perspectives, enable ideas to be *shown*
and *felt*, not merely *told*.

9. UNIVERSITY - STUDIO SPACE - DAY (6 MONTHS EARLIER)

A large room with tables clustered to form GROUPS OF PEOPLE.
On the tables, a myriad of objects - cardboard, sunglasses,
rubber tubing, etc. Everything but the kitchen sink.

On one table, Wise sits with colleagues DR SAGE and PROFESSOR
VERITY.

A KEYNOTE PRESENTER addresses the room.

PRESENTER

The purpose is to interrogate how we
make ourselves present in the world
by using found objects to announce
our identities. To use the situational
present of making to reflect who we

are and what the world means to us.

While most people are excited by this, Wise, Sage and Verity share blank looks.

PRESENTER

Begin! We'll share our practices
in about half an hour.

Wise breathes in. Sage stares at the objects. Verity picks up a piece of chainmail.

LATER

The groups are now presenting back. SELF is ... pontificating.

SELF

And so we used the newspaper as a way
of connecting with narrative, and kind
of rolled it up to represent the ... the
cyclical, somewhat never-ending nature
of stories - what we might think of as
a conveyor belt of clichés.

Ironical sniggers from Wise and Sage.

SELF

(showing his phone)

And then this selfie ... where we all
lean against the concrete pillar out
there ... this is a kind of research
proposition about the materiality of
non-human entities. Yeah. We decided
not to smile in the selfie, as a way
of ... kind of ... to contradict the
purpose of the selfie, or at least what
it's come to mean, to kind of probe
questions like, 'what is real?' and 'is
the smile a social construct?' So, as
a group, we lean on the pillars to ask,
'What is a pillar in today's society,
and is it worth smiling about?'

Rapturous applause from the room - a research epiphany!

But Wise, Sage and Verity can't look at one another for fear
of cracking it.

PRESENTER

I'd love to read more about that.
Maybe you could transcribe your

conversations for a journal article?

SELF and his group look enthused.

PRESENTER

Ok ... let's go to ... group 5!

She looks over to Wise, Sage and Verity.

A momentary panic between them.

WISE

(under breath)

Let's just tell them we didn't do it.

VERITY

I agree.

But Sage wants in.

She stands and interacts elaborately with the objects.

SAGE

Ok, so ... We also found the props to have inherent research qualities. And we stress the process of our interacting with them as a legitimate and distinctive and contribution to knowledge.

Supportive nods from the room. Wise has to look away.

SAGE

Ok, so ... yeah, the cardboard we decided not to do anything with - we contemplated folding it, and at one point tearing it - but decided that as a found object, it needed to just 'be'. We thought this was a neat way of critiquing how the constant barrage of social media works to ... kind of entangle truth with untruth. The cardboard as it is here does not lie, we might say.

Wise and Verity are literally biting their fists.

SAGE

The rubber tubing, in relation to the glass clown, we wanted to lay side by side. This is a sort of stance about fibre optic cables ... umm ... like we live in a networked world, with communication part of our everyday scaffolding - from mobile phone towers to under the sea bed cables - and the clown, well that's a visual metaphor for how we hide behind masks of identity. The clown itself, of course, a wonderful nod to ideas of the carnival and the grotesque.

Wise and Verity are writhing. Sage is struggling to keep up the pretense herself.

SAGE

Finally, the felt hat with the rusting bulldog clip ...

But it's no good. Sage cracks it. As do Wise and Verity. They resemble a pack of hyenas.

Confused looks from the room. Nobody knows why this is funny.

10. INT. AEROPLANE - NIGHT

Ko, hair everywhere and now munching on a packet of pretzels, listens intently to Wise.

WISE

Which is why stories are like the fabric of our existence. And why they matter.

Ko nods a lot - but she might not be getting it.

WISE

Listen to this.

He finds a passage from the PhD.

WISE

(reading)

'it is in the nature of every real story to contain something useful; that in every case the storyteller is someone who has counsel for the reader; and that the purpose of storytelling, as it used to be, was the conveyance of

something of value, of use, of wisdom'.⁹
(to Ko)
Does that sound preachy?

KO
Sometimes I'm too busy to think that
I'm very happy to be told how to feel.

Ko pours the remnants of the pretzels into her mouth.

WISE
You'd make a great peer reviewer!

Ko screws up the bag and throws it at Wise.

11. EXT. AIRPORT - RUNWAY - DAY

The aeroplane touches down in the beautiful heat.

12. EXT. AIRPORT - ARRIVALS - DAY

Wise exits with a large suitcase. Ko has a small pull-along.

WISE
All this way for two nights?!

KO
I've got a hospital to run and a
boyfriend who can't cook.
(beat)
I guess you'll be spending a week
on the beach?

Wise looks guilty.

KO
You academics are such blaggers!

WISE
We need time to think. Ideas need to
be incubated.

KO
So do premature babies. Think they
wouldn't like a week in the Pacific,
thank you ATO?

Wise doesn't know if this is a joke or not.

Ko whistles loudly and runs for a taxi.

KO

Good luck! Keep telling your stories.

(beat)

And don't be picky. Pass the PhD with flying colours. Make someone's day!

Wise goes to call back, but she's too far away. He looks on with a smile - who is she and what's she about?

WISE

See you when I've lost my marbles.

He pulls his case along towards the shuttle bus.

13. INT. UNIVERSITY - LECTURE THEATRE - DAY

Wise stands in front of a packed lecture theatre. People look refreshed, many of them glowing from the sun. A holiday?

The slide projecting behind him confirms him as the keynote speaker. The title of his talk: 'A Vacuous Screenplay in Search of Rigour'.

Wise scans the room. Finds his calm. Looks to his notes and begins.

WISE

I could start by telling you a story about meeting a world leading dementia researcher on the plane over here. And how we bonded over a shared love of research - in very different forms, clearly, but nonetheless, both of us agreeing that what we do is important to many, many people.

(beat)

But I'd probably have to flesh it out somewhat ... add some new flavours ... maybe even twist the truth a little. And who would know?

(beat)

So instead I'll tell you a slightly different story. One that I hope can not only outline the ideas I have about all the stuff we're here to talk about this week, but can also perform these ideas through the very use of fiction. The fictional screenplay and fiction as a research methodology.

(beat)

Interior. Aeroplane. Night.

(beat)

A screenwriting practice PhD exploring ethnicity and marginalised voices has been submitted at a university in WA. The dissertation offers a comprehensive and rigorous discussion of how ethnic minorities have been portrayed on Australian screens to date, and the 'gaps' in representation are discussed in terms of opportunity: the potential for a counter-representation, giving voice in quite a literal way. The examiner, en route to a prestigious conference in Hawaii, is expecting a documentary drama screenplay or similar that draws on an historical event or person to give context to the counter-representation being offered. But he is surprised when he reads the title of the screenplay - *Bronzed Zombies* - and what is clearly a high concept teen horror film set in the contemporary Gold Coast ...¹⁰

END OF SCRIPT

Endnotes

1. This could be Ingold 2013 – but then again, it could be anything.
2. There's almost no point in trying to pin down the reference.
3. Williams 2013, p. 250.
4. Williams 2013, p. 253.
5. Berbary 2011, p. 186.
6. Kerrigan et al. 2016, 89-90.
7. Haseman 2010, p. 151.
8. Stroud 2008, p. 1.
9. Benjamin 1970a, p. 86, cited by Nash 2014, p. 98.
10. Batty 2016.

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Research Statement

Research background

Creative practice research is a staple of many university research cultures, and is a core endeavour of many creative arts academics. We know a lot about its potential as a site of knowledge production and dissemination, and about the fabric of such work (i.e., where the research resides; the synthesis of theory and practice). We know less, however, about the form or genre of creative practice research, particularly regarding the role that fiction can play in such an endeavour. This screenplay thus asks: How can a fictional account of the struggle to define and defend creative practice research allow us to experience these very things, all the while commenting upon the place of fiction (as research) in the academy?

Research contribution

A Vacuous Screenplay in Search of Rigour draws from existing research frameworks, and the author's own experience of writing and theorising research-led screenplays, to portray, in a comedic way, the possibilities and pitfalls of using fiction storytelling to disseminate research findings in imaginative ways. Character, plot, theme and dialogue raise methodological questions about creative practice research and, through in-action fictional modelling, propose solutions. Endnotes to scene text and dialogue trace the roots of these academic discussions.

Research significance

The first published academic screenplay to depict the institutional research cultures within which its very mode of research sits, this work provides an innovative addition to the large body of work on creative practice methodologies. It is a companion to a published paper that explored the special role played by fiction in the academy (Batty 2016), in which some of the same academic debates (and references) were played out more traditionally. This screenplay thus does the work of that paper in a form relevant to its very focus – fiction. It is published in *TEXT* as a leading academic journal in the field of creative writing.