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Best practice? The problem of peer reviewed creative practice research

Abstract

One of the key differences between creative writing and almost every other discipline in the humanities is that it lacks a scholarly apparatus that assigns value to published works through the process of peer review. In 2008, the Creative Practices Area at the University of Technology, Sydney conducted a double-blind review of an extended work of fiction in order to assess the impact of the peer review process on writers' work. This study, and the problems it highlights, is timely in light of the Rudd government's ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) system for the quantification and evaluation of academic research - in particular, the planned introduction of a peer review process for creative works to be conducted and monitored by the ARC (Australian Research Council). [note 1]

One of the fundamental principles through which knowledge is traditionally constituted and given value in the university is the process of peer review. However, despite the steady incorporation of creative writing into the academic mainstream since the mid twentieth century (Myers 1996; Dawson 2005), writers have been slow to evolve anything resembling a process of scholarly review, although various systems of review have been formulated, debated, and even implemented in other areas of academic art practice, including film and media production, design and the performing arts, with varying success (Strand 1998).

Johnston and Krauth (2008) have argued that the concept of peer review originated in the first half of the seventeenth century, specifically as a process for assessing and authenticating work in the sciences, and has been gradually codified into the formidable system for the authentication of scientific knowledge that exists today. In the wake of the sciences, other disciplines have also created their own systems for the authentication and recognition of research, although this has been a largely invisible process, because it has occurred over centuries, and because it occurs in the context of an institution - the university - that is designed to authorise and naturalise those conventions. Hence, it often needs to be pointed out that while scholarly frameworks might appear immutable, they are actually cultural, historical, and profoundly political.

This is especially apparent with respect to the publication of controversial work. For example, following the publication of several disputed studies in the medical journal *Lancet*, the editors of *Nature* (1999) argued that the 'increasing significance' of peer-review was a 'worrying' factor, not only with respect to the 'unquestioning' faith placed in journals by the media and the non specialist reader, but also with respect to the 'growing dependence within the scientific

community' itself (*Nature* 1999: 387). Richard Horton (2000), the editor of *Lancet*, subsequently amplified these concerns. In an article published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, Horton wrote:

The mistake, of course, is to have thought that peer review was any more than a crude means of discovering the acceptability - not the validity - of a new finding. Editors and scientists alike insist on the pivotal importance of peer review. We portray peer review to the public as a quasi-sacred process that helps to make science our most objective truth teller. But we know that the system of peer review is biased, unjust, unaccountable, incomplete, easily fixed, often insulting, usually ignorant, occasionally foolish, and frequently wrong. (Horton 2000: 148-49)

As Johnston and Krauth (2008) point out, the codification of peer review into its current rigid structure is largely a product of the twentieth century, and particularly of the post-war period. This codification can be seen as both a response to, and a product of, the bureaucratisation of the university system, and the need to demonstrate accountability in public institutions that use taxpayer funds. Thus in Australia, for example, there exists the formidable DIISR system (Dept of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research) that ranks published works in tiers from A to L, including a profusion of subcategories indexed with numerals, so that an Australian writer/scholar is relegated to the lowly J1 category for a novel, compared to the coveted A1 for an extended work of nonfiction published by an academic press (i.e. the 'research monograph') - and these numerical indexes are then used to determine our status in a given system. In Australia, as things currently stand, the J1 category does not contribute to any of the funding blocks, with dire consequences for scholar/writers who find their output undervalued not just in terms of their access to research funds, but also when it comes to determining workload policy at the institutional level.

Perhaps it is precisely because writing is so fiercely insistent on its own 'creativity' (so much so that it has incorporated the very concept into the name of the discipline) that it has been equally fierce in its rejection of the scientific model with its emphasis on the quantification and repeatability of research. However, science is also a creative discipline. In fact, as the palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould (1992) has eloquently argued, scientists ignore creativity at their peril. 'Numbers suggest, constrain and refute; they do not, by themselves, specify the content of scientific theories' (Gould 1992: 74). For Gould, the danger in the scientific valorisation of objectivity at the expense of creativity means that some scientists fail to account fully for the intensely subjective processes that lead them to one interpretation among many. In short, they prefer a model of objective 'discovery' to a model of subjective creativity or invention.

Though both writers and scientists have remarked upon and even attempted to manipulate the similarities between art practice and 'blue sky' scientific method (Amsler 1986; Stewart 2001; Kroll 2002), the discourse of art tends to approach its object with a different set of prejudices. In the face of Aristotle's dictum 'nothing can come to be from what is not', many writers continue to claim that they must conjure up both their form and materials (instead of, for example, 'discovering' them in the laws of nature, as Plato once suggested, or else, simply working with or against a particular artistic tradition). Hence, the 'superstitious dread' to which some writers refer in talking about their method or process. Marion Halligan (2009) succinctly summed up this view in an art review in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, arguing:

If I think, everything is lost. I've known this for a long time. Most writers do. That is why they have a superstitious dread of telling people what their next book is about (or their last one, come to that). In order to describe it they have to think about it in a way that is nothing to do with the way they write it, and they are afraid that the rational account will destroy the imaginative process. (Halligan 2009)

But this, too, is a cultural assumption - a legacy of Romantic and proto-Romantic discourse. And there are many writers who have long ceased to subscribe to the discourse of 'inspiration' and 'art genius' that underpins Halligan's position. Most recently, for example, the British playwright and independent scholar Michelene Wandor (2008) argued that writing needs to be reconceived as a material practice or 'mode of imaginative thought', and that the entire nineteenth century discourse of 'magic' and 'muses' - and its contemporary equivalent, 'writing as therapy' - needs to be banished from the writer's lexicography.

The Problem of Value

Despite its shortcomings, there are many ways in which a peer review process may be functionally no worse - and in some ways may be better - than the current system, which is one in which the market tend to act as the ultimate (or, at least, *de facto*) determiner of the value of a given piece of work. In practice, academic writers are hired on their literary reputations, and the literary imprints of the major publishing houses are generally ranked higher than local or self-publication. Literary journals provide outlets for shorter forms, such as poetry, personal essays and short stories, but there are fewer alternative literary outlets for longer forms such as the novel, not to mention film scripts and plays. Malcolm Knox (2006) recently argued:

the literary novel is being slowly abandoned by those publishers who operate according to the [commercial] model. Our biggest publishers will not publish a book which they don't think can sell 4000 copies ... Heaven help the first time novelist. It is harder than it has been in generations for a first-time literary novelist to be published in his [sic] country. Heaven help the second- or third-time novelist. (Knox 2006)

The literary journal *Overland* recently acknowledged the gravity of this problem, and later in 2009 will be publishing a novel in lieu of its regular edition. The problem has also been recognised by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, which recently changed the funding rules for the New Works category, allowing locally and self-published writers to qualify for arts funding, so long as their work is reviewed in major literary journals or metropolitan newspapers (Australia Council 2002). In other words, for the purposes of the Australia Council, the Picador or Vintage imprint is no longer taken as the sole indicator of the value of a literary work.

For academic purposes, it is perhaps unsurprising that the values of the marketplace are often at cross-purposes with the idea of literary production - let alone whatever might be said to constitute 'research' in creative writing. Research inevitably suggests innovation, investigation, or experimentation (and may even be at odds with the concept of aesthetic success), and this inevitably makes a work less marketable. In the age of Bookscan (Knox 2005), in which the marketing department is the most powerful branch of the multi-national publishing house - an age in which the major booksellers are seeking to reduce

risk and increase profit by renting out book space to publishers in the same way that Woolworths rents shelf space to grocery manufacturers - it could even be argued that the process of peer review may provide a palatable alternative to the 'invisible hand' of the market.

Models for Peer Reviewed Creative Practice Research

The model of peer review with which Australian writers are perhaps most familiar is that of the Australia Council - and its processes are generally regarded as more transparent than, say, the workings of the judging panel for the Miles Franklin or the Premier's Literary Awards. According to Josie Emery (2008), formerly Executive Officer to the Literature Board, under the guidelines used to assess New Works grants for emerging, developing and established writers, the seven members of the Literature Board are first asked to score every application from one to ten against three criteria.

- 1) Creative substance
- 2) Ability to engage the reader
- 3) Literary merit

According to Emery, the results are then fed into a computer program specifically designed to identify 'standard deviations' in 'numerical rankings', which are then thrashed out at a specially convened four-day meeting of the Board. This meeting is also attended by up to eight independent observers, appointed by the Australia Council in the interests of ensuring equity and diversity, for example, by supplying additional regional representation, absent expertise, or alternative ethnic-cultural perspectives. The observers are allowed to speak to the applications, but do not engage in the final vote. To quote Emery (2008), 'The benefits of the Australia Council model are that the works are genuinely peer reviewed and the process is fully transparent and accountable. These are important considerations for Government entities using taxpayer funds.'

However, critics of the Australia Council argue that the system fails to live up to Emery's claims. To quote former Literature Board member Angelo Loukakis, 'It is not a scientific model, despite the protestations of the Australia Council. It is a battle of competing aesthetics, it depends on the forcefulness of individual rhetoric, and is played out against political imperatives' (Loukakis 2008). These imperatives, Loukakis argues, do not merely arise from the fact that the board members are directly appointed by the Federal Minister for the Arts, but also from the bureaucratic emphasis on equity over merit - the need to spread funding across all states and territories, for example, including diverse cultures, demographic subgroups, and literary genres.

Despite Emery's protestations, the concept of literary merit is far from being a settled question. This problem was highlighted in Tess Brady's (2002) investigation into the realities and myths of judging the *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award. In her article, Brady pointed to the huge mismatch between public expectations of the judging process, and the reality that 'Few judges publicly record their process.' Brady cites the example of an article in which the former judge and Vogel Award winner Nigel Krauth revealed his possibly idiosyncratic dislike of the word 'whilst', and author Tom Shapcott's revelation that the judges in the 1979 Canada Australian Literary Award were so deadlocked that they awarded a prize to the second choice on everybody's list, the irony being that this 'second rank' writer turned out to be Michael Ondaatje. This is far from being an unusual predicament. For example, as Jean Bedford (2009), former judge of both the Australian/Vogel Literary Award and the NSW

Premier's Literary Awards, has argued, 'you can end up with the second or third person on your shortlist, not because theirs was the best work, but because the work was also second or third on somebody else's [shortlist]. You can end up with the merely mediocre.'

The vibrancy of creative writing is often said to derive from the way in which it traverses diverse fields of community, artistic and academic interest (see, for example, Dawson 2003). In this sense it might be argued that the danger of any system that attempts to produce a consensus view of literary merit is that it can constrain this diversity. Though Johnston and Krauth (2008) have pointed out the dangers of peer reviewers 'operating in isolation', the obverse also holds true in that decisions thrashed out through committees may well engender a conservative approach to culture through the art of compromise.

Another possible model of review for creative work is the concept of double blind peer review - the standard that is widely regarded as best practice in the rest of the academy. However, this system is not without its own shortcomings. In addition to Johnston and Krauth's (2008) concerns, there remains the problem that the processes through which papers are evaluated in a given discipline are, analytically speaking, quite naturalised. As Jen Webb once argued, 'Other disciplines have research values that are well established. Works are judged against well-understood scholarly frameworks or conventions that have been formed over decades' (Webb 2008). Writing does not have such a consensus. In fact, it appears to be uncertain whether it is actually an independent discipline, or a sub-branch of literary studies or cultural studies. It is also unclear whether literary merit, new knowledge or something altogether different ought to be the 'true object' of the discipline (see, for example, Dawson 2008). The argument regarding literary merit also becomes more difficult to sustain in the wake of the poststructuralist critique of cultural value - for example, in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's (1987 and 1996) increasingly influential argument that literary value as it is currently constructed amounts to little more than a form of class prejudice. Hence, in order to enter into any kind of peer review system, academic writers would need to arrive at an understanding not only about what constitutes 'research', but also about what constitutes the 'object' of the discipline.

The Problem of Evaluative Criteria

In order to answer this question, the Creative Practices Area at the University of Technology, Sydney, convened a working party specifically to consider the problems associated with applying evaluative criteria to writing. The group was guided by the idea that the criteria commonly used to evaluate research in the humanities are not necessarily applicable to writing - or, at minimum, that their application is unclear, with a potentially distorting effect on art practice. The working party was also guided by the assumption that the concept of 'literary merit' was an ill-defined or insufficient standard - and, in any case, was unlikely to meet the criteria demanded by the university sector. Hence, the committee rejected the idea of proxy indicators for literary merit, including arts funding support (e.g. a grant from the Australia Council), the quantity/quality of reviews in national newspapers and literary journals, the inclusion of the work in festivals with a board serving a curatorial function (e.g. the Edinburgh Writers' Festival), the publication of extracts in literary journals where the editor serves a curatorial function (e.g. an extract published in *Granta*), sales figures, the quality of the imprint/publishing house, and national and international literary prizes or awards. Rather the working party embraced the view that research in the context of creative practice in the academy must be said to constitute 'new knowledge' for the discipline.

The working party agreed on the following criteria for a trial review of an extended work of fiction:

1) What new kinds of knowledge are established?

You might like to consider:

a) Does the work provide conceptual advances?

To what extent does the work provide significant contributions to ideas, attitudes and interpretations? Does the work contain formal innovations of style, content or perspective? Does it create new hybrids of form or style? Does it explore new writer reader relationships, or challenge pre-existing attitudes in these areas?

b) Does the work make constructive critiques?

Does the work contribute to social, cultural, political or aesthetic debates? Does it provide a source for creating links between seemingly disparate genres, or new hybrids of form, style or genre?

2) Why has creative practice been chosen as a research method rather than other more traditional research methods?

Is there a clearly established problem that drives the inquiry? What sorts of knowledge frameworks have been used?

3) Is this a work of excellence in its field?

1) New Knowledge

The decision to retain 'new knowledge' as a requirement had far-reaching consequences for the study - it radically differs from the view taken by ASPERA (Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association), for example, who have been conducting a trial peer review of work in media production for almost eight years (Berkeley 2008). The ASPERA trial has operated on the assumption that all works of art are *ipso facto* original contributions to knowledge - whereas the decision to retain 'new knowledge' as a requirement entails grappling with the idea that a literary work of outstanding quality may not in fact constitute new knowledge, and conversely, that a literary work might be an excellent piece of research, but also be a failure as a work of art.

2) Methodology

The question on method was a similarly provocative one. Eva Sallis (1999) has argued that a research equivalent work is one of which it might be said that a certain percentage could have been expressed as a conventional research article. The working party chose to reverse this premise - asking, what does this work do that other conventional research cannot? In other words, new knowledge was expected to arise precisely because of the unconventional research method. Accordingly, a piece of historical fiction might aim to destabilise the empirical assumptions of the discipline of history, new knowledge might emerge because a given piece is narrated from the point of view of subaltern voices that are usually silenced, or more generally, fiction of various kinds might be said to draw attention to the fictional nature of all knowledge.

3) Excellence

Though excellence was arguably the least defined of all the criteria, the working party was driven by an idea of creating a standard of literary merit, with benchmarks against which the standard might be assessed. This was not viewed as a reversal of the working party's earlier decision to reject proxy indicators for literary merit. Rather, literary merit was only deemed insufficient

when taken on its own. However, the working party also believed it was impossible to benchmark excellence for the purpose of this particular trial.

The working party also considered the pragmatics of the review - whether the creative work should be considered on its own, or accompanied by an exegesis or author's note. It was argued that the benefit of the exegesis is that it contributes to a body of work that adds to the knowledge of the discipline. It was also noted that a number of works do make their process transparent, and that there was a consequent danger of creating a two-tiered system that privileges transparent as opposed to opaque or more traditional works. However, the working party decided to trial the creative work without an author's note with the intention of re-assessing this issue in the wake of the trial.

The Trial

The work sent for review was an extended piece of novelistic realism, dealing with the themes of grief and mourning, specifically a father's inability to cope with grief following the death of a child. The work has a magnificent opening sequence, in which two thirteen-year-old girls die in an icy pond. The action commences two years later. The parents are separated. The father - Darcy - is still grieving, he finds that he can no longer paint, and has abandoned grief counselling. He carries a burden of guilt with respect to an affair with his next-door neighbour, the mother of the other dead girl, whose husband, an evangelical Christian, has a history of violence. The landscape of the novel is a kind of limbo - in which meaning and purpose seem to be absent - except, perhaps, a sense that the world is governed by a malignant fate.

The work was chosen on the basis of availability, but also because it was the work of a published/professional writer who is a lecturer in creative writing. The work was also chosen because it was produced in the research context, specifically for the purposes of a research degree.

The referees for the study were Dr Delia Falconer (University of Technology, Sydney) and Professor Nicholas Jose (University of Western Sydney). The referees were selected because they are both esteemed authors and academics with a background in traditional research. Jose was Professor of Creative Writing in Adelaide before moving to the University of Western Sydney. He gained his doctorate in English literature from Oxford University, and his monograph *Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature* was published in 1984. His novels have been shortlisted for both the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Miles Franklin Award. Delia Falconer completed her doctorate in English literature and cultural studies at the University of Melbourne. She is a respected literary critic, and her essays and reviews have been published in Australia and overseas. Her novels have been shortlisted for the Miles Franklin and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

The Reports

Dr Delia Falconer

Delia Falconer reported, 'My first thoughts as assessor are that this is a very good manuscript, of publishable quality.' However, she felt it was too difficult, without any additional information from the author, to determine an answer to the question regarding new knowledge. Falconer suggested a range of possibilities at the level of both theme and content, but was also not convinced

that they were successful enough to be identified as a 'conceptual "advance"'. Falconer continued:

The achievements of this manuscript are largely technical: it is clearly written, engrossing, and tight. Its style is particularly commendable: a straightforward, recognisably 'North American' prose style that is declarative and pared-down, yet quietly energetic. Rather than being innovative in style, then, this manuscript appears to be generically self-aware and deliberately adoptive of a North American style of flat observation and understatement, impressive in its suppleness and control of voice ... These qualities are valuable in themselves, but do not appear to fit comfortably within the criteria provided. (Falconer 2008a)

Falconer argued that one of the most important questions for the referee is whether the writer is working with or against a particular tradition. Without this knowledge, Falconer argued that she could not infer whether the work made conceptual advances or not. Falconer continued:

Is it fair to the writer and the assessor if the assessor is left to determine these things? What if the assessor determines an entirely different research problem or set of criteria and then judges the writer harshly for failing to carry out these 'aims'? (Falconer 2008a)

The working party agreed to send Falconer an extract from a festival paper given by the writer on the subject of his/her work. However, after reading the author's statement, Falconer (2008b) replied in an informal email exchange that had this statement accompanied the work in the first instance, she would actually have judged the work more harshly. The writer's paper stated that the work was intended as a 'metaphysical thriller', and Falconer argued that she would have felt more negatively towards the work, as she would have been 'judging it against the tropes of thriller-writing, particularly in terms of a complexity of action and suspense, neither of which really features in [the work]'. She continued, 'whereas I would have thought it was working more in a kind of Ondaatje-esque reflective, mourning mode', adding, 'the writer was probably quite lucky that I imposed a different set of generic expectations on [his/her] text, another marker might have invented quite unsympathetic generic expectations and parameters.' Falconer also observed that she would have preferred a well-argued exegesis that framed the creative work in a scholarly context, rather than the informal expression of creative 'intention' as set out in the festival paper.

Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, Falconer concluded that while the work did not constitute 'new knowledge', she believed that it might be said to constitute a work of excellence in its field. She wrote:

This is, nevertheless, a novel of excellence in its field - a more than solid example of a pared-down, realist novel about grief that falls within a North American literary tradition. Because its qualities are those of working well within an established form, rather than working against it, publishability is perhaps the most helpful factor to consider as an assessor (although it is arguable whether publishability would always be applicable, if a text is highly experimental, for example; then again, writers like WG Sebald and David Mitchell do provide compelling benchmarks). One's feeling is that this book could find a

publisher; but that it is perhaps not startling enough, or innovative enough in terms of style, characterisation, and density, to be certain of finding one. But it is a sensitive, well-executed and largely satisfying novel.

Professor Nicholas Jose

Nicholas Jose also argued that it was difficult to approach the research context without an exegesis or statement from the author, 'at least to the extent that the exegetical component would be integral to the overall research project and would help frame its questions and methods.' However, unlike Falconer, Jose argued that the work did in fact attempt a range of conceptual advances, though he stipulated that this was 'with varying degrees of success'. Jose continued:

The originality of the conception lies in its exploration of how two neighbouring smalltown couples respond in the aftermath of the accidental death of their two daughters, who are school friends. The work is a grief memoir in the form of a fiction. It attempts to explore this material in a highly focused but many-faceted way, concentrating on the four parents as the anniversary comes round, with the action focused on Christmas Eve and the atmospherics concentrated in winter ice and snow. It thus attempts something like a crystalline structure, with all parts, acts and consequences, interconnected. (Jose 2008)

Jose also argued that there were some further attempts at experimentation particularly with respect to language in the early sections of the text, but suggested that 'these are stylistically different from the rest in a way that detracts from its clear outline.' He also argued that there were attempts in the text to experiment with writer-reader relationships, arguing, 'the work ambitiously attempts to give us the experience of a range of disparate characters, including two women'. However, Jose again argued that this 'did not entirely work. One character, Darcy, is really at the centre of the narrative. Other male characters more or less share his voice, and the female characters are largely conceived through their response to the males.' He concludes, 'what is innovative conceptually is sometimes at odds with the raw and excessive energy that is the work's strength.'

Like Falconer, Jose was uncertain about the research problem. 'If the parent's grief is the problem, it has been treated in a heightened imaginative way, aestheticised even as a justification of self-pity and failure. But these questions are not challenged.' He agreed with Falconer that the impact of the work was largely emotional, 'The most powerful things in the work are the hard-hitting writing, especially its evocation of raw and violent emotions, and the overpowering atmospherics of cold and pain.' Despite these impressive aspects of the work, Jose did not agree that it was a work of excellence in its field. He argued, 'Some further work needs to be done on the narrative pace and variation of tone, rhythm and points of view. There are hanging threads and an uneasy mix of almost slackness and concentrated intensity'.

Conclusions

Jose and Falconer both felt that an exegesis was needed in order to frame the work successfully in terms of its questions and methods. However, Falconer's observations on the author's festival paper also suggest that authors statements can in fact raise more questions than they answer - for which reason, the concepts of intention and affect have been longstanding problems in critical theory (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954). In this sense, it might even be argued

that the trial raises the possibility that the 'new knowledge' requirement may not be a sufficient departure from current academic/scientific frameworks. While it might be argued that the knowledge imparted by a text could be about any number of things (the sheer force of the work, or its method of engaging the reader, for example) the condition of new knowledge appears to depend on the possibility of unambiguous intention on the part of the author. Moreover, the principles underpinning the scientific model would also seem to require that the 'research question' or problematic should be framed in advance of the research. This would seem to put in question some of the longstanding principles of creative writing pedagogy in its current form - whether it is the concept of 'uncertainty' in process advocated by writers such as Glenda Adams (2007) or the materialist and theoretically informed approach recently advocated by Michelene Wandor (2008). Alternatively, it may result in a retrospective framing of the 'research question' in the light of the 'answer'.

Excellence in Research for Australia

Under the recently released 'Draft ERA Submission Guidelines' (2009), universities will be asked to peer review the top 20% of their creative output - specifically, that output that can be said to have a stake in the knowledge domain. The draft guidelines require that each work be accompanied by a statement of no more than 250 words addressing the following criteria:

- 1) Research Context
 - Field
 - Context
 - Research Question
- 2) Research Contribution
 - Innovation
 - New Knowledge
- 3) Research Significance
 - Evidence of Excellence

Interestingly enough, these criteria roughly correspond to the emphasis on Method, New Knowledge and Excellence that were used in the UTS trial, and the problems identified in this trial may well hold true for the new system. Moreover, the example of a research statement found in the appendix to the report (ARC 2009: 63) gives rise to further concerns - in particular, the way in which the chosen work functions as an 'illustration' of a primary concept drawn from process philosophy. Under the heading 'Research Contribution' in which the artist is asked to define the innovation or new knowledge that arises from her work, the ARC provides the following example of a statement:

The paintings *Multiple Perspectives* by Y address the question of the unstable nature of identity as expressed in painterly terms through a study in unstable facial phenomenon using the philosophical concept of 'becoming'. In doing so it arrives at a new benchmark for the discipline ... (ARC 2009: 63)

In this case, Deleuze's (1987) concept of 'becoming', as outlined in his monumental work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, when applied to portrait painting, is said to generate 'new knowledge' about instability of identity, which is then cited as a 'benchmark' or point of reference from which other paintings can 'build'. It is worth pointing out that the illustrative function of the exemplary artwork is actually very marked, given that Deleuze also writes on the subject of 'faciality' at length in the same volume (Deleuze 1987: 167-92).

Furthermore, the 'new knowledge' example provided by the ARC is curious in light of the fact that instability of identity has been a longstanding theme in all mediums and genres of the arts since the time of Virginia Woolf (at least). Five minutes on Google returned a range of artists who have dealt with the subject of instability and identity in portraits, including the usual suspects such as Francis Bacon, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger, a huge number of lesser or relatively unknown artists, and a telling quotation from 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' by the poet John Ashbery (1974), in which he talks about facial expression in a Parmigianino portrait existing 'in a recurring wave / Of arrival', which would seem to pretty much 'answer' or explore the ARC's research question. Moreover, Ashbery contextualizes the problem of instability and facial expression through a dynamic perspective including that of the artist, writer, reader, viewer, object and text - in a manner that is (arguably) far more complex and compelling than the 'new knowledge' put forward in the ARC example. In other words, the only 'new' aspect in the artwork appears to be its citation of Deleuze.

The problem here is not one of hostility to, or rejection of, theory. Rather, the concern is that when art is reduced to an illustration of an idea that has been created elsewhere, it ceases to be, in any sense, 'a mode of imaginative thought' (Wandor 2008: 7). It is perhaps worth pointing out that much contemporary theory has actually used art as its starting point. Foucault's exploration of the author function draws explicitly on Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* (Foucault 1984; Beckett 1974), Foucault's (1994) magisterial work *The Order of Things* owes much to the seminal influence of Jorge Luis Borges and Raymond Roussel (the later also being the sole subject of Foucault's 1986 *Death and the Labyrinth*), not to mention the more diffuse but still visible influence of the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the French *nouveau roman*.

It may well be argued that this is making too much of an example that appears in an appendix to a much larger report, which deals not only with the creative arts, but with the physical, chemical and earth sciences. However, on this score, it is perhaps worth restating the views of Lancet editor Richard Horton: 'The mistake, of course, is to have thought that peer review was any more than a crude means of discovering the acceptability - not the validity - of a new finding' (Horton 2000).

One of the principle issues highlighted by the UTS study - which will also become more pressing under ERA - is the extent to which the discipline of writing lacks any sort of consensus about its aims, objects and methods. For the reality is (in the absence of robust aims), that whatever criteria are ultimately imposed by the ARC for the purpose of peer review are bound to have a strange driving effect on academic - and artistic - behaviours.

Note

1) This paper is the result of a research project undertaken on behalf of A/Prof John Dale, Head, Creative Practices, University of Technology, Sydney. The members of the UTS Working Party were A/Prof John Dale (Head, Creative Practices), A/Prof Paul Ashton (History), Dr Anthony Macris (Writing), Chris Caines (Media Arts Production) and David Aylward (Faculty Research Office). It should be noted that decisions taken by the UTS Working Party were not unanimous, nor do they necessarily represent the views of the author. return to text

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