



An engaged contribution to
thinking about interpretation
in research in/into practice

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I am deeply wary of starting from the premise that there is an inherent difference between methods of evaluation of research in the scientific model and those modes typical of the arts and humanities. I am equally suspicious of accepting the implicit and current hierarchy in which the scientific model is taken as the norm against which the soft-edged and evaluatively subjective arts and humanities have to defend themselves like indulged or patronised children. The typical scientist will suggest that it is relatively easy to establish research value in her/his community by means of such criteria as size and regularity of research grants (peer reviewed, networked), numbers of PhD students per researcher, and publication in a small number of community acknowledged leading journals.

Perplexed, and possibly ignorant or indifferent, the scientist will ask the artist how her/his research is to be adjudged as significant. This situation, which regularly occurs in interviews in research-led universities, is a result of the insulation of most practising scientists from any *sociology* of professional practices or *anthropology* of institutions, belief systems and knowledge as a social production. Keeping the insights arising in the social sciences, arts and humanities at bay by means of simplistic caricatures of the touchy-feely nature of our work, and thus keeping themselves uncritically within their own, invisible models of research practice, the ordinary, scientifically-oriented researcher feels complacently secure in undermining as research the social and cultural analysis typical of the arts and humanities because the notion of knowledge of ourselves as thinking, sentient and affected beings is relegated to the non-scientific in favour of a model of knowledge in which the desires, interests and competences of the researching subject become invisible before the apparently passive world awaiting investigation. Feminist theory let alone our old friend Sigmund Freud has much to say about the factors determining this model of research. Arts and Humanities have established that there is a history, a *sociology* and a *philosophy* of science which easily demonstrate the presence of paradigms and their operation in defining the collectively-agreed criteria for what can be considered legitimate knowledge and relevant methods of seeking and verifying it. Such analysts of the history and practice of science underline the power of belief as well as the role of imagination and even aesthetics in the creation and acceptance of its theories and conjectures.

Thus are we really convinced that there is a clear difference between the so-called scientific model which is unambiguous and collectively endorsed against which the pluralistic and less defensible modes of interpretation prevailing in the arts and humanities? To fall prey to such a distinction would be not only to misrepresent the creativity, conjectural riskiness of the great moments of scientific advance, but also to fail to bring to bear on all areas of research the insights of social and cultural research about the social production of knowledge, and its psychological determinations. The irony of the positivist is s/he is unaware that s/he is a positivist; s/he is unaware that there are any 'ists' to be, that is, that every practice has already inbuilt assumptions that underpin modes of research and knowledge production. What constitutes knowledge or is accepted as truth cannot be claimed alone by those whose curiously ideological position is a wilful misrecognition of the *history* of its knowledge claims and the elasticity and interested nature of its practices of scientific research.

This is not to deny that an epistemic shift did occur in the history of human investigation and search for understanding with the so-called scientific revolution that has introduced a range of observational research and inductual interpretation of data, displacing the

hitherto teleologically deductive explanation of phenomena and prime causes. But then even this body of practices is susceptible to belief systems. Leading theorists of science have argued that the fundamental principle of science is disprovability rather than provable certainty. Moreover, we can plot out the ways in which scientific research has followed fashion, been implicated in military-political interests that fund certain research and discourage others. There is also plenty of evidence of an aesthetics in scientific research, the work of imaginative leaps and the appeal of beautiful explanations. Without rejecting the Kantian call for us to be adults, to think for ourselves, testing the world against our capacity for critical judgement, evaluation and self-reflection, it is vital not to fall prey to the difference between the Enlightenment as reasoned critique and an instrumentalised Gradgrindism typical of bourgeois utilitarianism.

Perhaps out of stubbornness or folly, I have never found the question of qualifying research in arts and humanities, and especially in the creative arts, fundamentally a huge problem. Perhaps this is the result of an engagement precisely with critiques of ideology, discourse theory, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, and all methods in the arts and humanities which at once dethrone the man-centred delusions inherent in the positivist scientific practice: the subject/object relation, the unreflective hierarchy of knowing consciousness and the known world. The moment one steps off the self-blinding track of positivism and begins to recognise the social formations of knowledge production, which recognising in any field its own formations while seeking to minimise ideological self-blinkering and acting in responsible awareness of the problems of all social production of knowledge, it becomes clear that there are a range of methods for producing and evaluating different kinds of activity as research while also excluding others but not on a science/arts binary. But at the same time we can perhaps agree on some fundamental issues. I might propose, for example, a double axis of validity and significance. All research must meet the test of validity that references the context, community, and state of play. Thus the researcher is obligated to look to the left and the right, to evaluate the state of research in the area, around the problem, in the field into which s/he wishes to intervene. It is only in relation to this sense of the lateral extent of the current field that the researcher can both perform and be adjudged for a significant contribution/intervention. Within this formulation lie further common practices formulaically contained in the prescriptions for applications for research funding: key research questions addressed to and justified in relation to the validity test, research methods by means of which these questions can be explored, an archive of some material found or created or existing to which the questions can be posed and by which they can be explored. Artistic practice as much as work in any other arts/humanities field can understand itself in these terms, while not all artistic practice is thus oriented to research: its does not pose questions purposively, it does not see its methods as modes by which questions can be posed and explored. It does not aim to have as its outcome something that can be contextually considered as knowledge/understanding. Thus the creative has several meanings, which will need to be distinguished. Thus is displaced the mythology of individuated, spontaneous and eccentrically private artistic creativity which becomes subject to reflective and analytical discourse only once it has left the privacy of the studio and encountered the alien world of gallery, market and discourse, a mythology symptomatic of the privatised conditions of modern entrepreneurial capitalist cultural production. Yet the space of such private, self-defined pursuits has also produced some amazing results in terms of what we can retrospectively, as art historians understand as context-shattering events of genuine creative transformation of a field. This is a paradox we shall need to explore.

Thus, just as blue skies scientific research is restricted by the current conditions under which funding is allocated for research in these highly administered times, so the risks we face now in the arts and humanities are associated with a system of grant-based criteria for research activity and evaluation which makes every researcher, including the increasingly professionalized and institutionalised artist-as-academic answerable to a mode of peer evaluation and institutional responsibility to the non-research community who oversees the funding councils.

Thus the troublesome issue comes with the specification of the difference between an

output and an outcome, the specification of which is now demanded by the funding bodies. This requires a degree of political nous and cunning self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher to know and be able to justify *in advance* the desirable nature of the outcome of a project whose whole purpose is to be creatively productive of new knowledge. Can failure be a legitimate outcome? Can a negative finding be valued in this atmosphere? In such a climate is the discussion about the criteria for valuation and interpretation a sign of the further instrumentalisation and administration of the hitherto less corporate modes of creative thought and imaginative research in arts and humanities, which created their own, small communities through the book and the gallery, or is it a site of critical resistance to the trend towards 'research management'?

Herein lies the contradiction which those of us involved with the creative arts and humanities confront. Funding bodies specify the nature of the outcome desired: currently economic benefit to the community from whom the funding, as public money, is requested. It is the narrowness of the imagination in which economic return on the investment is deemed the only criterion by which such 'useless knowledge' production as artistic or imaginative speculation that is to be contested not in the name of our sectarian interests but because it is an assault on humanist values of any kind at all, a cultural war on culture itself as the place of critical reflection on and exploration into the human as subject in her world.

In my paper I shall articulate some of my own impatience with research management and examine what the debates about research methods are doing to the practices of creative thought and the problem of interpretation. Working from my own experience as a researcher in contest with the dominant values of the society in which I have worked, I shall explore the politics of interpretation made possible by inverting the current hierarchy (science/arts) and insisting on the necessity for the critical terms of analysis offered in the arts and humanities to contest the assumption that there is a scientific model to which the arts and humanities are problematically other.