

Discussion paper

Intellectual content in the creative arts

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Although postmodern cultural and literary theory have succeeded in making clear the difficulties, or perhaps simply in making difficult the earlier clarities, involved in issues of value and content in the creative arts, and of distinctions between genres, these do not seem to me to make the questions of judgement in postgraduate artistic projects any more difficult than those involved in inherent in assessing theses in the kinds of analytic and narrative projects that are common in the arts. In each case it seems to me that what is necessary, if the project is to be submitted for a degree, is a clear problem to be solved, and a rigorously intellectual approach to its solution.

This would rule out purely aleatory artistic projects, just as it would many kinds of history, curriculum design, management project that might nevertheless have its own validity. The solving of a problem is for me the key to the kind of project, in any field, that is appropriate for a postgraduate degree program. In extending the scope of degrees to allow the submission of artistic as well as scholarly work, the university has recognised the intellectual element in artistic work, not given a licence for the submission of any kind of artistic production to satisfy degree requirements.

The nature of the problem and the methods appropriate to its solution will differ from one artistic field to another, just as they differ from one scholarly field to another. But the notion that some areas are intellectual and some creative is false. As Steve Martin shows in Ficasso at the Lapin Agile, the work of scientist and artist is the same--they both seek to reveal a world, and in revealing it they change it. The distinction between preception and reason goes back to Aristotle, and continues to appear in various accounts of scientific method that separates the process of amassing evidence--observation or perception--from the process of analysis--induction, testing, deduction--and allows only the latter as an intellectual operation. Rudolph Arnheim, in Visual Thinking (London, 1970) analyses this model from both a psychological and a philosophical point of view, demonstrating its fallacy. To perceive is to think. From a different point of view, Hofstadter, in Godel, Escher, Bach: an eternal golden braid (London, 1979; Harmondsworth, 1980) discusses the relationships of science, mathematics and art to show their inseparability. The examples yhe takes, from music, mathematics and the visual arts would, in my opinion, all qualify as research projects.

In the arts, the nature of the problem may vary from the purely formal--analogous to mathematics--to the social, the psychological and the personal. For example, a set of sonnets may attempt to solve the problem of expressing in words the concept of nothingness (Tranter, Dransfield). A work of autobiography may endeavour to trace the behaviour of the adult to the experiences of the child (Beaver). A novel may try to show the continuing life of the past in the present and the distinction between the two (McLaren, unpublished). A poet may set out to discredit the linearity of the epic or of history

(Weir, Dugan). A novelist may endeavour to realise the life of an alien but ancestral cultural tradition (Yahp, Epanomitis). A biographer may seek to show through a particular life the power in Australia of a particular cultural tradition (Davidson). In each case, if the project is to be acceptable as a postgraduate project, the author should be able to set out where she comes from--literature survey--where she is heading--problem--and how she intends to solve it--method. If the project as set out in these terms, and its likely outcome, is self-sufficient, there is no need for further commentary.

These terms imply that the project must make an independent contribution to our knowledge or understanding. Thus a work that merely exploits established techniques to produce a given outcome would not qualify. Nor would the most innovative work that is designed merely to produce certain effects in its audience. Thus an advertising or public relations campaign, or the writing of a formula novel, would not qualify in itself, although it might form part of a thesis that extended our knowledge by examining the techniques used or the audience response to them.

The initial judgement about whether an artistic project is self-sufficient must be made by the prospective supervisor and justified, at the time of enrolment, to the Department and, at the time of candidature, to the Faculty committee and, if of doctoral level, to the University Postgraduate Studies Committee. This judgement should, I believe, be made on the grounds of feasibility and demonstrated intellectual content in the form of analysis and statement of the problem and explanation of proposed methodology.

The judgement of the continuing and completed project will be made, first by the supervisor and then by the examiners, in terms of its artistic resolution of its problem and its consequent contribution to knowledge. This resolution may, of course, be a demonstration that the forces contained in a particular work cannot be resolved--that is, that the traditional ideal of an artistic whole is not sustainable. Logically of course this is a resolution.

The best projects will, in the case of literature, be publishable, perhaps recognised by public awards. But the role of the supervisor and examiners is to judge whether it functions in its own terms as a work that makes an independent contribution to our understanding. This is independent of the question of how we or others may read the work, use it for our purposes: the issue at stake in reader-response theories. It is not independent of the question of aesthetic judgement, but this is, in my experience, an issue only at the borders along a continuum that runs from the instantly recognised work of excellence to the equally easily recognised meretricious or technically incompetent. The judgement of the borderline work is in principle neither more nor less difficult than the same judgement about a work of history or literary analysis. The real problem is the work of such genius that we cannot recognise its value. Here we have an example in the work of Derrida, or was it Foucault, who I believe did not submit his doctorate for examination because it was too far outside the accepted parameters. It is however more common for new writers to be generally accepted by their peers--in Australia, the nearly simultaneous publication by widely different magazines of the first stories of Peter Carey and James McQueen and the rapid and general critical acceptance of Patrick White (contrary to rumour) are examples of a general critical

consensus. Even the literary warfare in poetry circles in Sydney in the sixties, or the campaign being conducted today by Les Murray on behalf of rural idiocy, do not contradict this claim--the issues at stake in these wars are not about basic recognition, but about the level of recognition and reward.

It seems to me that these questions of judgement operate in the arts in the same way they do in every other field of scholarly and scientific research. The postgraduate student is embarking on a project that seeks recognition for work within established parameters of judgement. These parameters themselves provide the means by which they may be broken, when the new work can no longer be sustained within the old forms. The consensus of judgement will itself recognise the necessity of these breaks and acknowledge them when they come. But every system will fail in the face of genius, which must, as ever, make its own way. But the arts, in general, are not about the romantic conception of genius--they are about the application of talent, imagination and work to the problems of living. Our artistic and academic disciplines gives us the capacity to make judgements in this sphere.