

# Art as Research?

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Fine art ... is a mode of representation which is intrinsically final, and which, although devoid of an end, has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication. (Kant, *Critique* [Part I], 166)

To conduct research is, in the first instance, to explore, to wander about, without any itinerary in place, or any necessary destination in mind, but to do so with a fervency, an intensity of focus, that would not ordinarily be associated with an aimless stroll. While the Middle-French noun *recherche* ('act of searching closely') may appear to imply directionality, to hint at an *end* or *objective* by virtue of its origins in the Old-French verb *rechercher*, which combines the intensive prefix *re-* and *cercher* ('to seek *for*'), the Latin *circare*, from which the Old-French *cerchier* ('to search') is derived, implies a certain aimlessness: 'go about, wander, traverse'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, such explorations would follow no linear path—from 'research question' to 'research findings', for example—but would rather follow a more *circuitous* route, if the shared origin of both 'search' and 'circuit' in the Greek *kirkos* ('circle', from the Proto-Indo-European *\*kirk*, from the root *\*(s)ker*, meaning 'to turn, bend') is anything to go by. And while the prefix *re-* would sound to contemporary ears the ring of return or repetition, in the case of *recherche*—as an act of searching not *again* but *closely*—no such iteracy is implied, with the prefix perhaps recalling, instead, the now almost lost sense of 'undoing'.

Given the near total capture of 'research' today by the sciences, it would no doubt surprise the many 'Managers of Research & Development' currently employed by the world's most prestigious and humdrum universities and research institutions alike to learn that at the heart of their remit is the work of exploration (search) by way of deconstruction (undoing). Yet, etymologically speaking, the alternative would be not a constructive science (*scientia*, *episteme*), but an endless re-cycling, an incessant circling around the same old ground. 'Originally', then, research might thus be seen less as a linear movement down a path mapped out in advance, than as a searching *as though for the first time*, as though one did *not* know the features of the terrain or where one was going; a search, in other words, that rewrites the map. *Contra* Kant's famous dictum—*sapere aude*; dare to know—research perhaps calls for a special kind of non-knowledge at least as much as it draws on a well-established expertise. An enlightened ignorance, as it were, or an *undisciplined* inquiry.

Of course, present practices needn't remain accountable to their forgotten origins. As institutional and cultural contexts change, so do the meaning and the nature of the activities that are undertaken within them. As no academic researcher today can be unaware, at some point since the emergence of 'research' as a linguistic if not a scholarly phenomenon, a discourse of *scientific* research has imposed itself on or merged itself with an activity that previously had no *necessary* connection with what we today call scientific inquiry. (While acknowledging that we speak from an Australian context, and that things may or may not be different in other parts of the world, we doubt that our experience is without multiple equivalents elsewhere ... and so we don't quite speak from an 'Australian' context at all.) 'Science' here means much more than simply a branch of knowledge or learning, but extends to notions of reliability and reproducibility,

unambiguity, coherence and exactness, cumulation and systematicity; a set of connotations which helps set research up against not only its 'original' meaning, but also the entire field of enquiry known—in English at least—as the 'humanities'.<sup>2</sup> For the sciences, as Samuel Weber puts it, 'are generally regarded as the model of cognitive rigor whereas the humanities, preoccupied with values and standards, make their own evaluation difficult if not impossible' (*Institution*, 136). And in the absence of any hard and fast criteria for evaluating humanities research besides the production of scholarly works, the language of scientific research—literature review, research method, data gathering—has been increasingly called upon to meet the task of *evaluating* humanities research: for instance, in assessing research proposals for the purpose of distributing research funds.

The resulting conflation of 'science' and 'research' at the expense of other fields and forms of inquiry is a discursive transformation whose repercussions may be felt in a number of actions. Such gestures range from the changing names of governmental bodies responsible for administering research<sup>3</sup> to Harold Bloom's elegy for what he calls 'the Common Reader', who is supposed to recognise that all that's needed to truly *know* literature is not the kind of 'jargonistic', 'politicised' theoretical investigation that now dominates, according to Bloom, contemporary literature departments, but a pure and simple 'love of reading' (Bloom, *Western Canon*; see also Lucy, *Postmodern*, 163-71). But perhaps most instructive here is the document known as the *Frascati Manual*. Commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1963 and now in its sixth edition, the *Frascati Manual* proposes standards for surveying and measuring research and development (R&D) and, unsurprisingly, focuses almost exclusively on R&D in the natural sciences and engineering—almost, although not entirely, for a few isolated statements acknowledging the 'special problems of measuring SSH [social science and humanities] R&D' can be found scattered across the 250-page manual. Once again, the conflation of science and research appears to reveal itself in a kind of anxiety over the seemingly immeasurable, unsystematic nature of humanities research.

More fundamentally, though, the fact that it should be the OECD that has concerned itself with determining standards for surveying and measuring research already suggests that there's more to the discursive move from 'research' to 'science' than the establishment of cognitive rigour. As an organisation created to promote 'the highest sustainable economic growth' and 'a raising of standards of living in Member countries' (*Frascati*, 2), the OECD's *interest* in science can hardly be said to be *disinterested*. It's not so much the manner by which science attains its knowledge that sets it apart from the humanities, in other words, but rather science's 'capacity to produce the tools of social, and above all, technological power' (Weber, *Institution*, 136). To that extent, our historical and conceptual distance from the etymological origins of 'research' is marked less by a shift from meandering, disorganised search to disciplined investigation and scientific method, than by a retreat from dis-interested (literally, making no difference, lacking importance) inquiry with a view to harnessing the increased advantages that may be derived from instrumentality and utility.<sup>4</sup> Hence the *Frascati Manual's* emphasis in its formal definition of research on the *use* of knowledge as much as on its systematicity: 'Research and experimental development (R&D) comprise creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications' (30).

None of this should be taken to suggest that the meaning of science itself, however, is any more firmly fixed in its essence or by its historical antecedents. Indeed, the mutability, even equivocality of science is attested to not only by humanities-based 'cultural studies of science' (see, for instance, Martin, 'Anthropology'; Pickering, *Science*), but also by the celebrated paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould:

Science, since people must do it, is a socially embedded activity. It progresses by hunch, vision, and intuition. Much of its change through time does not record a closer approach to absolute truth, but the alteration of cultural contexts that influence it so strongly. Facts are not pure and unsullied bits of information; culture also influences what we see and how we see it. Theories, moreover, are not inexorable inductions from facts. The most creative theories are often imaginative visions imposed upon facts; the source of imagination is also strongly cultural. (*Mismeasure*, 53-4)

Perhaps more striking here than the fact that a prominent, Harvard-based, Ivy League-educated scientist should be challenging the presumed 'objective', 'decontextual' nature of scientific knowledge is the affirmation not only of the force of culture, but also of culture's positive contribution to scientific progress. A significant—to some, quite unpalatable—implication of this fact of the inherently cultural nature of scientific research is that the contemporary privileging of science as the measure of all forms of academic inquiry cannot be rejected as an historical corruption of a purer, more authentic concept of the forms and purpose of research. And to decry the 'corrosive' instrumentality of science from a location that is among the greatest of beneficiaries of science's accomplishments—the modern university, with its state-of-the-art communications technology, structurally sound buildings, public confidence and investment in research, not to mention reliable access to 'basic' resources like a clean water supply—would surely count as hypocritical in the extreme.

But further, Gould's affirmation of science's basis in culture, creativity, imagination and interpretation illustrates an enduring social concern with phenomena that, traditionally, have fallen within the purview of the humanities. And if the anxiety over research measurement appears in the first instance to stem from the apparently ad-hoc, non-standardisable nature of humanities investigation, Gould's observation suggests that it's not necessarily science's 'rigour'—'stiffness', 'severity', even 'bondage', following the Latin *rigidus* ('hard, stiff, rough, severe'), from the Proto-Indo-European *\*reig* ('stretch (tight), bind tightly, make fast')—that is the source of its investigative power. Indeed, for all the *Frascati Manual* makes of science's 'systematic basis', the measure of research almost always reduces to the fact of *novelty*—a slippage, as it were, that is repeated at the website of the Australian Research Council:

The term R&D covers three activities: basic research, applied research and experimental development.... **Basic research** is experimental or theoretical work undertaken primarily to acquire *new knowledge* of the underlying foundation of phenomena and observable facts, *without any particular application or use in view*. **Applied research** is also *original investigation* undertaken in order to acquire *new knowledge*. It is, however, directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective. **Experimental development** is systematic work, drawing on existing knowledge gained from research and/or practical experience, which is directed to producing *new materials, products or devices*, to installing *new processes, systems and services*, or to improving substantially those already produced or installed. (30; emphases added)

Or again: the current instrument established by the Australian government for assessing research quality—Excellence in Research Australia (ERA)—defines research as 'the creation of *new knowledge* and/or the use of existing knowledge in a *new* and creative way so as to generate *new* concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is *new* and creative' (12; emphases added).

Far from being science's virtue, in other words, standardisation and replicability are the *bane* of research: repetition and routine, as the very antithesis of what is 'genuinely' new, are what (scientific) research must *avoid* in order to be what it is. Indeed, science understood simply as the replication of essential standards could function only as a *myth*—a strategic and effective one, no doubt—on the model of what Derrida called, around the time of the first edition of the *Frascati Manual*, the 'myth' of the engineer ('Structure', 285). Speaking at 'The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' conference at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, a conference that it could be said was intended to confer a certain scientific status on the work of structural anthropology and structural linguistics, Derrida's paper ('Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'—and again we note that 'the humanities' does not quite have a corresponding term in French), is often cited now as the moment at which the structuralist enterprise started to crumble and post-structuralism began. As one of us has put it elsewhere:

The focus here [in 'Structure, Sign, and Play'] is on Lévi-Strauss's distinction between *bricolage* and engineering discourse, where the former describes an asystematic or creative approach to meaning, such that the meaning of a cultural practice or a literary text is produced unpremeditatedly, by making use of whatever happens to be at hand in order to see what 'works'. By contrast, engineering (or scientific) discourse proceeds according to unvarying rules and inflexible methods of analysis that enable the engineer or the scientist to solve a problem not by trial and error, but through the rigorous application of rational thought. In this way the engineer or the scientist appears to be the author of his own discourse, sole progenitor of an idea, a theory or a solution. As Derrida argues, though, this distinction between creative and rational thinking depends on a structure of determination that separates them by putting rationality first and relegating creativity to the order of a special or supplementary case. Yet if *bricolage*, as a form of creative thought in general, is characterized by the necessity of borrowing ideas and concepts from a general history of ideas, then surely *bricolage* is typical of every discourse. In that case the absolutely uncreative rationality of the engineer is a 'myth' created by *bricolage*. (Lucy, *Dictionary*, 133-4)

Shocking though it may be to many CEOs of university R&D offices, Derrida really isn't saying anything here that Stephen Jay Gould didn't say (again) in 1981: science 'progresses by hunch, vision, and intuition!' No less than Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, in other words, Gould's scientist works (according to Derrida's summary of the former's logic) with 'the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary' ('Structure', 285).

This is not to suppose that Derrida and Gould (or Briggs and Lucy) must be committed to holding that there is no distinction between the *bricoleur* and the engineer, or the artist and the scientist; or that 'research' belongs to science and whatever might count as the opposite of research belongs to art. Instead, to acknowledge that scientists proceed by 'hunch, vision, and intuition' is simply to acknowledge that *bricolage* is not external but intrinsic to science, and to any notion of scientific 'method'. Scientists don't have to hurl test tubes against laboratory walls, however, in feverish imitation of an avant garde painter, to act as *bricoleurs*, any more than artists are obliged to conform to a myth of creativity by using *only* their intuition or imagination in the production of their work, without any reference whatsoever to notions of method, technique or process.

*No method without bricolage*, then. But also: *no bricolage without at least something that might be said to approximate an idea of method*, albeit the notion of a pure and absolute method is a myth.

So why do university offices of research and development continue to distinguish between research (surely they mean *real* research) and creative practice or creative production? Never mind what Derrida and Gould might have said on the subject, or what we might be saying here, which no doubt could be interpreted or dismissed as a matter of opinion. But shouldn't university R&D authorities be listening at least to the OECD? As the *Frascati Manual* makes clear, research is *not* to be understood as the routine application of a preexisting method:

The social sciences and humanities are covered in the Manual by including in the definition of R&D 'knowledge of man, culture and society'.... For the social sciences and humanities, an appreciable element of novelty or a resolution of scientific/technological uncertainty is again a useful criterion for defining the boundary between R&D and related (routine) scientific activities. This element may be related to the conceptual, methodological or empirical part of the project concerned. Related activities of a routine nature can only be included in R&D if they are undertaken as an integral part of a specific research project or undertaken for the benefit of a specific research project. Therefore, projects of a routine nature, in which social scientists bring established

methodologies, principles and models of the social sciences to bear on a particular problem, cannot be classified as research. (48)

Research, then, is not reducible to 'scientific activities' per se; the mere application of a method cannot count as research in itself, but simply as a 'routine' practice that is 'related' to research, to *real* research. Real research isn't about the collection of empirical data or the application of a mythical scientific 'methodology'—it's about *innovation*. Real research isn't about process (application); it's about outcomes (innovation).

But if research is outcome-oriented rather than process-driven, why is it that creative production seems to be regarded (again, in Australia at least, though surely not only 'here') as the ugly sister of 'findings' that result from proven 'methods' of inquiry? Isn't *Hamlet* a research outcome—a *novel* or *innovative* product of Shakespeare's knowledge and manipulation of the rules and procedures (the 'methodology') of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre and drama? Yet if Shakespeare were submitting *Hamlet* for official recognition as research at an Australian university today, everyone currently working in the humanities knows that he would have to plead his case. In effect, he'd need to write a summary exegesis—to *explain* the research significance of his work according to terms that misrecognise the very meaning of research; whereas the work of any number of unremarkable scientists who will go unnoticed by history will automatically count as research if that work is seen to bring an established methodology 'to bear on a particular problem'.

Sucks to be Shakespeare!

But of course 'Shakespeare', as the brand name of a global industry, is doing fine. It's the work of artists who may or may not go unnoticed in the future that is the problem, because their work can't easily be codified according to a notion of social utility or application. No doubt this is an issue, too, for 'experimental' and 'speculative' as opposed to 'problem-solving' scientists, albeit it's the former who should be understood as doing real research according to the OECD; the work of the others, by contrast, '*cannot be classified as research*'.

The 'utilitarian' turn that Heidegger identifies in 'The Question Concerning Technology' and elsewhere, by which techno-scientific research came to be revalued for its social *usefulness* and thus was sundered from an idea of research-in-general—from *bricolage*, which came to be associated exclusively with 'aesthetic' practice—supplies the backstory to the current funding environment in which 'art' plays the beggar to well-fed 'research'. In this climate—or this *culture*—instead of recognition, art receives only handouts: in our own university, for example, a novel attracts 150 research points compared with 500 points for a scholarly book, and good luck getting any points at all for a creative digital production or a poem.

Or worse—a creative digital production *of* a poem! We shudder to think what our ORD might make of **Ken Miller's contribution** to the present issue, 'his' film (if that is the right word) 'of' a poem (or two poems) by John Kinsella. But it's not as though Miller simply pointed a camera at Kinsella's words and uploaded the outcome to Vimeo. The project, a fully collaborative one and a perfect example of *bricolage*, required Miller to assemble a crew, cast an actor, and 'direct' the process of filming and editing, all the while performing the work of exploration (searching) and undoing (deconstruction). The process, genuinely exploratory in nature, was thus inseparable from 'the project', not unlike a disinterested experiment in a laboratory, such that the outcome manifestly meets the OECD requirement for 'an appreciable element of novelty'. Indeed, and ironically, it's precisely its novelty that disqualifies it as research defined as the application of an established method for the purpose of solving a useful problem. The question of what Miller's film is *for*, then, a more or less unanswerable question, is the ultimate stumbling block here, trumping the question of whether it should be referred to as *Miller's* film or even whether it should be called a *film* at all.

Yet there's no unconditional sense in which this 'film' should have to answer to the question of what it's 'for', let alone what it's 'about', in order to count as research. While those charged with assessing the research quantum of creative works might sometimes wonder what a particular work is 'saying', surely this ought to be beside the point. Novelty, the quality of being new and unusual, is not the exclusive property of creative

works, although we doubt that a physics project, say, would be denied recognition as research simply because a non-specialist didn't understand what the project was about. In many if not most cases, moreover, university research assessors won't know what science projects are *for*, either; the fact that they're *science* projects means they must be 'for' something, and so they must meet the criteria of research.

What are these criteria? According to the ARC's definition of 'basic research', there are no criteria governing what a research project should be *about* (in the sense of a topic or a meaning) or *for*. Basic research is 'work undertaken primarily to acquire new knowledge of the underlying foundation of phenomena and observable facts, without any particular application or use in view.' So basic research is *about* the acquisition of 'new knowledge' concerning 'the underlying foundation of phenomena and observable facts', and what it is *for* is expressly nothing whatsoever in particular. Note that this isn't a sub-clause relating to a 'special' research category; this is the definition of bog standard, run of the mill, common as muck, bread and butter, *basic* research. On this account, shouldn't Miller's film be recognised as a *basic research* outcome, instead of having to settle for consideration as a research *equivalent* under the special category of 'creative production'?

This would pose the question of what 'new knowledge' does the film produce or reveal? But what's 'new' could hardly be expected to take the form of  $E = mc^2$  ... or the vast majority of what currently passes for research in the sciences would fail to qualify as research. 'New' doesn't have to mean *earth-shattering* or *paradigm-shifting*. In this case, what's new (but new to whom?) might be the knowledge that imagery belongs to the visual and not to the linguistic arts: *poems can't be imagistic except in a metaphorical sense*. Since the only *image* that the film shows, however, is that of the actor reciting the words of Kinsella's poem (or poems), then it could be that the film produces or reveals the knowledge that film 'itself' is always other than a purely *visual* medium as such. What, therefore, *is* the underlying foundation of poetic and filmic phenomena? What *are* the observable facts constituting a poem or a film?

These questions may not lead to a cure for cancer, but they are no less *research* questions simply for seeming not to have an obvious social use pointing to an immediate utilitarian good. Policy-makers and bureaucrats may not see a purpose to the question, *What to call a 'film' comprising only the incremental repetition of a single image?*, but this is not to say that such a question couldn't lead to a profound shift in social understandings about, say, the nature of reality (*What's the underlying foundation—the ... underlying ... foundation—of phenomena and observable facts in general?*) in the future. If we can't quite decide the essential atomicity of a film or a poem, what are we basing our understanding of reality on? The fact that rocks and other material objects can be broken down into their atomic parts?

Reality, then, is defined by what is *observably* elemental or atomic? By what can be studied under a microscope or by machines that go 'ping!'?

In this context, art, or *experimental* art (which could be a TV show like *Seinfeld*, a Jackson Pollock painting ... or *Graphology Relapse*) takes us, like experimental science or *philosophy*, circuitously, without purpose, to the limit of things.

By this measure, surely we shouldn't need to ask after ways to calculate the 'equivalent research value' of creative production. Wouldn't the question to ask instead be this: *What should we call 'research' produced by the application of an established method in the pursuit of solving a problem?*

## Notes

1. We derive this and subsequent linguistic traces from the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#). #back
2. 'In English at least', because, as Samuel Weber notes, 'there is nothing, in French or German academic discourse [for example], that really corresponds to the English notion of the Humanities.... What takes the place of the Humanities in Germany are, of course, the *Geisteswissenschaften* [the sciences of Spirit]'

(*Institution*, p.133), while in French discourse the closest approximation would be ‘*les sciences humaines*’ (the human sciences). [#back](#)

3. In Australia, since the introduction of the Research Training Scheme in the 1990s, federal administration of research has been overseen first by the Department of Education, Science and Training (until 2010), and subsequently by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, and Research, to which the portfolio of Tertiary Education was added very recently (November 2012). [#back](#)

4. For Heidegger, of course, this shift is bound up with the question of technology as *Ge-Stell* (Enframing). For while it is often ‘said that modern technology is something incomparably different from all earlier technology because it is based on modern physics as an exact science’, on Heidegger’s account, ‘the reverse holds true as well: Modern physics, as experimental, is dependent upon technical apparatus and upon progress in the building of apparatus’ (*Question*, 286). Modern technology is less the product of modern science than the very inclination to put ‘exact science to use’ (ibid.). [#back](#)

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