

Thoughts on Contextualising Practice

Mica Nava

©2005

[Published in *Journal of Media Practice*, Vol. 6.3, 2005. ISSN 1468-2753]

Abstract:

This article looks at the contextualisation of practice both in relation to the requirements of the RAE and as part of a longer history of reflexivity in textual and visual culture. It offers suggestions for the analysis of practice in relation to its different moments and levels -- production, text and consumption -- and focuses on the notions of 'structure of feeling', 'jouissance' and 'affect' to see whether they can help explain the sensations involved in consuming practice.

The contextualisation of practice research is interesting at the moment for two main reasons. First because academic practitioners are 'invited' to do it for the RAE and so, in the run-up to RAE 2008, it makes sense to learn how to do it in an appropriate fashion in order to play the game successfully -- criticisms of the audit culture notwithstanding. But secondly, the process is also interesting in itself, as part of a longer intellectual transformation and rearrangement in the priorities of critical reflexivity in textual and visual culture.

RAE 2008 and the need to develop a better understanding of what theorised practice means was the main theme of the *Articulating Media Practice as Research* symposium held at London South Bank University in June 2005. This concern should be viewed in the light of the report written after RAE 2001 by members of the Communication, Cultural and Media Studies panel (UoA 65) which makes the point that, despite a widely-circulated statement of interest in assessing practice-based research, few such outputs were submitted and of those that were, many were not presented to best advantage (though there were however some impressive exceptions which did succeed in offering a reflexive account of practice as research).¹ What is particularly striking is that apparently many of the producers of the outputs that *were* submitted did not make use of the 300-word allowance which offered the opportunity of explaining the contribution of their work to 'knowledge and understanding' 'through original investigation'. Moreover this failure was not confined to Communication, Cultural and Media Studies. It was the case also for other practice panels (i.e. UoAs 64, 66 and 67). So the 300-word 'factual statement' seems to have been a significant stumbling block for many participants in 2001.

The draft criteria for the next RAE are now in the public domain and are being circulated for consultation among all participating institutions before being finalised in the autumn of 2005. It is already clear that, this time round, panels and subpanels will be even more encouraging in their invitations to practitioners, and that, if anything, the distinction between theory research and practice research will be minimised still further. 'Practice' will be just one way of approaching an object of study and doing research. Other ways include history, textual analysis, theory, empirical research, applied research and so forth. Additional information for all of these modes of research may be added in the if considered appropriate. This

possibility is obviously particularly relevant in the case of 'non-text' outputs. The draft criteria for 2008 UoA 66 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies state:

Where an output is not in a conventional published form (e.g. an artefact, digital object, broadcast etc.) or the way in which it meets the indicators of excellence are not readily apparent in the output itself, then a factual statement of up to 300 words may be included ... This factual statement should identify evidence beyond the research output itself that will demonstrate how it meets the three indicators of excellence i.e. Significance, Originality, Rigour. The statement will be used to assist members in forming their expert judgment on the quality of the research output. The sub-panel will disregard unsubstantiated assertions or opinions on the quality of research.²

The 300-word statement therefore is a great chance to contextualise and theorise the output: to defend it.

So why should there have been resistance to this opportunity on the part of some practitioners last time (and this includes both 'pure' and 'professional' practitioners)? Why should they have been reluctant to examine their work reflexively? I don't have hard information -- I haven't done the research -- so am only speculating here, but although perhaps in part related to a wider resistance to the RAE because of its association with the 'audit culture' (see eg Shore and Wright 1999)³ the main reason for failing to submit work or complete the 300-word statement is more likely to have been rooted in the persistence of belief among practitioners (and perhaps their advisors too) that the worth of professional and art practice is self-evident and requires no additional explanation. This kind of attitude derives in part from a longer Leavisite tradition which presupposes that an educated public will have the requisite skills of critical cultural appreciation to understand the work in question. It also emerges from a notion of creativity as an inexplicable gift *bestowed* on the cultural producer rather than the product of historical and contingent forces. In this schema the artist or the professional practitioner intuitively *does* and the critic *criticises*. The context from which the texts emerge and the ways in which the texts are received in the public sphere are not considered very important. Finally, the text itself -- the output -- is often judged, implicitly or explicitly, according to the traditional criteria of high culture rather than as part of a social genre. These approaches have a long history and are embedded in the theoretical and aesthetic frameworks of art schools and some literature departments as well as the ideologies of both the political left and more elitist right.

It is interesting to note therefore that, despite the institutionalisation of the much-criticised audit culture in higher education, the criteria of the RAE reflect an engagement with a more open conceptualisation of 'culture', one which is rooted in the broad critical parameters of cultural studies. In this approach, which is no longer new, there is no clearly delimited conceptual break between popular culture and high culture forms: for instance it is now increasingly recognised that advertising cannot be distinguished in formal terms, or indeed even in social terms, from fine art or avant-garde film (Nava and Nava 1992) and that distinctions between modernist and 'popular' literatures are more a construction of critics than internal properties of texts (Huyssen 1986). This kind of challenge to the literary and artistic canon is by now increasingly established across a range of disciplinary frameworks and is evident in the concerns of the RAE.

Rather more recent is the trend, also reflected in the new RAE criteria (and also more enlightened than the traditional approaches in my view), of the effacement of boundaries between cultural production and cultural theory: between written texts on the one hand and visual and time-based texts on the other. The implicit assumption is that all emerge from certain historical, intellectual, aesthetic, political and biographical contexts. All adhere to, or break with, certain formal conventions and have, or don't have, a particular analytical content. All produce meaning and have effects through their interaction with viewers and readers and their dissemination and institutional framing. All will display in varying degrees the RAE criteria of 'originality, imaginative range, significance and rigour'. Sometimes, and this is more likely in written work, the context and formal frameworks are embedded in the 'text'. But the three levels I refer to here -- i) context of production ii) formal and representational properties of the text and iii) modes and context of consumption -- are a useful way (though obviously not the only way) of thinking about the composition of the dreaded 300 words.

Thus one approach would be to address some of the following explanatory frames and levels. These suggestions are offered as triggers to prompt reflexivity about outputs and to highlight the original and significant qualities of a project for the RAE's factual statement. *It must be stressed of course that these are absolutely not prescriptions*; different people will wish to stress different aspects and moments.⁴

1. Production

- biographical influences
- geopolitical location
- intellectual context
- aesthetic and imaginative sources
- technological frame

2. Text

- formal properties
- thematic concerns
- methodological and technical matters
- argument
- references, intertextuality

3. Consumption

- production of meaning (signification and discursive location) by readers and viewers
- emotional and bodily responses (unconscious, 'jouissance', affect)
- institutional dissemination (publication, exhibition, cultural industries)
- practical and policy implications

Stuart Hall has used a not dissimilar approach in his discussion of the history of black diasporic arts in postwar Britain.⁵ In a recent paper he weaves together aesthetic concerns (modernism, postmodernism, nativism) with geopolitical factors (migration to the metropolis and the politics of race) and broad shifts in cultural theories of identity and identification since the 1970s. Although not easily separable, he also pulls them apart for the purposes of his narrative to identify distinctive fields of vision, thematic concerns and structures of feeling.

Raymond Williams's term 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977; see also Gilbert 2004) is used here by Hall to describe a social climate which encompasses the emotional economy of practice, whether textual or visual or virtual or digital. Yet this

dimension has historically not been much addressed by theorists, especially in relation to the *consumption* of cultural production. In fact, despite a long history of attempts to analyse the determining consequences of the unconscious and psychic life for the production of 'art', which dates back to Freud himself (1985 [1910]), the significance of the biographical and emotional in the production of theoretical or 'scientific' outputs, as opposed to more obviously creative ones, has barely been addressed at all, though in my view is likely to be just as apposite.⁶

Psychoanalytically-informed readings of *texts* in film studies, photography and advertising (as well as many other domains) are all well established. There is no need to rehearse them here. But what is new and really interesting are recent developments in the theorisations of how texts are consumed and *experienced*. This in part mirrors the more general shift of focus toward consumption and consumers in cultural and media studies. It is also part of the shift of slightly longer duration towards spectatorship and reading which was given impetus by Barthes' theories of readership and the production of meaning (Barthes 1982) and Laura Mulvey's preoccupation with the gaze (Mulvey 1975). What I am referring to specifically as 'new' is the uptake of Brian Massumi's reading of Deleuze and 'affect' (Massumi 2002) and the application of this provocative and fertile concept to visual and aural texts. Affect is in the same broad theoretical field as '*jouissance*' (Barthes 1982; Kristeva 1984). Both refer to the almost indefinable bodily effects of cultural phenomena, to *sensation* rather than interpretation. Yet, despite these similarities, they emerge from distinct intellectual traditions.⁷ Affect in the discursive framework influenced by Massumi is to be distinguished from emotion and the unconscious because it refers to physiological responses that precede and bypass meaning, language, memory and even the unconscious. Feeling has ontological priority. (See Jeremy Gilbert (2004) for an excellent and lucid analysis of the debate; see also Paul Gormley (2005) on affect in film, Steve Goodman (2004) on audio-culture, and Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova (2002) on cybernetic culture). Although I'm not entirely persuaded by the conceptual and experiential distance between affect and the emotional that some of these approaches insist on, I nevertheless think that the specificity of affect could well prove a useful concept for practitioners attempting to explain the significance of their own work because what it offers is a way of theorising what we don't understand -- the unpredictable, incalculable, corporeal, *palpable* effects of texts -- whether avant-garde film or TV advertising, whether classical music or garage.

So in sum, what I'm saying is that there is more than enough of interest to say as commentary about any particular output. I have offered some headings here and developed some thoughts about how the consumption of practice can be understood and written about. There are multiple other ways, but the different levels in the process of production and consumption are probably worth hanging on to in order to undermine the idea that texts exist in a historical vacuum. The three hundred words solicited by the RAE are quickly taken up if the kinds of questions posed here are addressed. In fact in my view we should be demanding at least a 1000 to do justice to the theoretical complexity of cultural production. It is important for practitioners to assert the academic value of their work. Contextualising it in writing will make a significant contribution.

Notes

¹ Report on UoA 65 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies circulated to all participating institutions after the 2001 RAE and authored by the members of the panel which was chaired by Philip Schlesinger.

² RAE2008 draft criteria for UOA 66, paragraph 12b, as at 16/07/05.

³ Unlike 'teaching quality audits', the RAE has rewarded innovative cultural and media studies departments with funding and recognition. Since such departments are disproportionately located in the former polytechnic sector, one consequence has been to dislodge slightly the traditional hierarchies of Higher Education and boost the status of some modern universities. In this sense the RAE effect has been more positive than some critics concede. However this does not justify what universities have done with RAE ranking. The most notorious and deplorable misuse was the closing down of the Cultural Studies Department at Birmingham University

⁴ They are entirely personal and do not in any way reflect the views of RAE Sub-Panel 66.

⁵ Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture, *Three Moments in the History of Black Diaspora Visual Arts*, Conway Hall, 19.11. 2004.

⁶ I have attempted this contextualising work on a collection of my own essays, see Nava 1992.

⁷ Affect is derived from Deleuze and Guattari while *jouissance* has its roots in Lacanian psychoanalysis. However Massumi (2000) himself has tried to bring the two together in his assessment of the art work of Bracha Ettinger, see Pollock (2004).

References

Barthes, Roland (1982) *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana.

Freud, Sigmund (1985) [1910] 'Leonardo da Vinci' in *Art and Literature, Vol. 14 Pelican Freud Library*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Gilbert, Jeremy (2004) 'Signifying Nothing: 'Culture', 'Discourse' and the Sociality of Affect' in *Culture Machine*, <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Articles/gilbert.htm>.

Goodman, Steven (2004) 'Speed Tribes: Netwar, Affective Hacking and the Audio-social', in *Cultural Hacking*, ed. F Leibl, Vienna: Springer.

Gormley, Paul (2005) *The New-Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary American Cinema*, Bristol: Intellect Books.

Huysen, Andreas (1986) 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other' in his *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Macmillan.

Kristeva, Julia (1984) *Desire in Language*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Massumi, Brian (2000) 'Painting: The Voice of the Grain' in Bracha Ettinger, *Artworking 1985-1999*, Brussels: Palais de Beaux Arts.

Massumi, Brian (2002) 'The Autonomy of Affect' in his *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Mulvey, Laura (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.

Nava, Mica and Orson Nava (1992) 'Discriminating or Duped? Young People as Consumers of Advertising/Art' in Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism*, London: Sage.

Parisi, Luciana and Tiziana Terranova, (2002) 'A Matter of Affect: Digital Images and the Cybernetic Re-wiring of Vision' in *Parallax*.

Pollock, Griselda (2004) 'Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metamorphosis' *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol. 21, No. 1.

Shore, C. and S. Wright (1999) 'Audit Culture and Anthropology: Neo-liberalism in British Higher Education' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (4).

Williams, Raymond (1977) *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Contributor Details

Mica Nava (m.nava@uel.ac.uk) is a professor of Cultural Studies at the University of East London. Although now working predominantly in history and theory, she used to be a 'practitioner' (in fine art and agitprop theatre) and for several years co-ordinated cultural and media studies production teaching at UEL. Her publications include *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism*; *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*; and *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference*.