Manifesto for filmmaking as organisational research

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Abstract

This article is an effort to build a manifesto for the academic acceptability of filmmaking as organisational research. While a film does not offer an argument with premises to reach a conclusion, it does accomplish its own distinctive manifestation of research as a performance of thought. Drawing on experience of academic film projects, we promote the idea of using filmmaking not only to convey research ideas but also to communicate the full sensory variety of organisational life. Finally, we see film as a powerful and valid feature of academic research output, providing opportunities for scholars to convey understanding to a broader public than the academy alone.

Keywords

Affect, aesthetics, filmmaking, organisational research methods, performativity

Introduction

Film is one of the most communicative technologies in the media landscape. It also expands the possibilities for organisational research (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014; Steyaert et al., 2012). Compared to many other academic fields, there have been few attempts to engage with filmmaking in organisation studies (Burrell, 1993; Linstead, 2017a; Salovaara, 2014; Scalfi, 2007; Wood and Brown, 2014; Wood et al., 2016a). More efforts should be made to promote the role that film can play in organisational research design and process.

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Film-based research is a fragmented and incomplete field. It often attempts to satisfy competing academic demands, making it difficult for traditional research managers to identify processes that will support engagement (Knudsen, 2016). There is a lack of consistency with regard to the assessment of originality, rigour and significance on expert panels using peer review (Glisovic et al., 2016).

If the possibility that film can do research could be established, then certain questions arise. How does film convey an argument or explain a phenomenon? How does meaning differ in its effects when communicated through film rather than the written word? In the analysis of scholarly publishing, how should the creative process of film be regarded and evaluated? What infrastructure is needed to support film-based research content and expression?

We aim to foster a deeper understanding of the practice of filmmaking as organisational research and to stimulate debate about the new knowledge being claimed. We see ourselves as exploring the possibilities that future explorers will be able to map more precisely and definitively. We are early adopters aiming to pave the way for a second wave.

Manifesto

1. *Rescue the field* – create awareness of the conceptual resources taken for granted when organisational researchers only use film as an instrument of empirical data collection;
2. *Provoke new thought* – recognise film as an aesthetic mode of expression, creating a body of sensation that disrupts the relationship between researcher, subject and user;
3. *Do more than conventional research* – use film outputs as a means of performing organisational experience that more informational or conceptual approaches cannot (easily) capture;
4. *Integrate production and distribution* – unsettle and dislodge some established paradigms and current standards in organisation studies and consider the quality and evaluation issues of film-based research.

Rescue the field

Filmmaking within the academy is a developing area. Academic fields attempting to introduce films into their research repertoire have raised questions about our experience of them, the ways they are made and the kinds of objects they are (Belk and Kozinets, 2005; Hietanen et al., 2014; Hindmarsh and Heath, 2007; Schembri and Boyle, 2013).

A question is whether film is a faithful (or at least as faithful as possible) representation of reality, as essentially illustrative of some independently given research problem, or is more explicitly performative in the sense of enacting thought. Pink (2009) clearly draws the distinction between faithful reproduction and the notion of performance when she comments that the usual taxonomy of enquiry uses film to '*represent* sensory experience, rather than to *research* it' (p. 99; original emphasis).

The dominant emerging model for film-based organisational research is the faithful conveyance of content: representing actions in day-to-day settings at a subjective distance. In much the same way that the camera can fix transient human events for further analysis, film and video recordings constitute 'primary data' or 'raw material' that others can watch and verify (Hindmarsh and Heath, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). What is distinctive and worrying about this approach is that the authority is all on the side of the subsequent analysis. The film exists only as an object for reflection. It has no particular weight or influence in the discussion that arises from its contemplation. As a result, a whole range of assumptions are in place before organisational researchers think about the integration of film into their academic work.

Films also provide ontological and epistemological opportunities for researchers. They offer different ways of communicating or enacting dimensions of the organisational world from signs communicated exclusively through written or verbal language. In viewing a film, 'one may feel totally involved … in the world, a world known through the senses, given to experiencing sensations' (Jamieson, 2007: 23–24). This (multi)sensory experience can invoke our imaginative capacities, enacting phenomena and concepts tacitly, as when a film-image produces an intense emotional or cognitive response.

Representation is not the right word for the moment of encounter between filmmaker, subject, and viewer. On the contrary, films are 'non-representational' (Thrift, 2008) modes of expression that convey subjectivity, consciousness and affects, giving them a meaning beyond reason, information and logic. They facilitate an immediate, more direct 'and largely involuntary process of encounter' (Thrift, 2008: 8) with the specificities of the present moment than conventional, observation-based organisational research methods. Sinnerbrink (2011, 2016) frames this idea, involving affect, embodiment and the corporeality of practice, as 'cinematic thinking'.

A film can be understood as doing research if it can engage audiences with themes and issues via 'cinematic means' (Sinnerbrink, 2016). Ideally, a film should make manifest within itself the analysis that justifies its presentation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994) – that the film has done the research. The implication is that film shares certain features with traditional written or verbal discussions, particularly with respect to the ethical tension between a representation of reality and its effective construction through editing (Prosser, 2011; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005). What is especially important is that, to be ethical, a film must distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning (Barthes, 1977). A danger is that the emotional meanings behind a film's sign may be considered as a literal or denotative representation of the world rather than mediated for the screen. This distinction is crucial if we want a film to meet the generic threshold quality criterion for doing organisational research.

The tension between film as unadulterated denotation or as a type of constructed expression can be seen in corporate movies such as *Inside Job* (Ferguson et al., 2010), *Smartest Guys in the Room* (Gibney et al., 2005), *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002) and *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004). Taking their lead from expository documentary conventions, almost all of these films focus on the possibility of objectivist, authentic representations of the people and events they depict, while ignoring the fact that they reflect the subjective intention or interpretation of the filmmaker and of the audience.

One reason the above films seem to be 'spontaneous and authentic' (Bruzzi, 2000: 7) is because they appear to confer intelligibility on reality 'out there'. But this image of communication is questionable in that it flaunts its 'lack of concern with conforming to the style of objectivity dictated by documentary history and theory' (Bruzzi, 2000: 7). They trade by telling the viewer what to think rather than underpinning what is happening on screen, forgetting that the apparent immediacy of the world has already passed through a production system; the films are constructions rather than reality, so to speak (Nichols, 1991). While this discrepancy does not necessarily invalidate their contribution, we should be troubled if the process of real life being 'helped' in different ways was taken as a sign of 'authentic representation'. How then might a performative film contribute new understanding or knowledge about a phenomenon or concept?

Rather than being a representation of reality in front of a camera, the ontology of performative film is always already marked by an internal relation of immersive involvement that shows (evokes) its topic rather than simply telling the story. Two recent examples of film-based studies that each highlight less representational and more performative approaches to evoke the thought of work practices – in some particularly difficult and often dangerous environments – are Castaing-Taylor and Barbash's (2009) *Sweetgrass* and Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's (2012) *Leviathan*.

Sweetgrass immerses us in the day-to-day world of sheepherders in the high mountain pastures of Montana, while *Leviathan* plunges us into the lives of commercial fishermen aboard a tossing and pitching trawler on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Both works make use of observation, performance and cinematic presentation in combination to reflect or enact a form of thought that is far more immersive and experiential than informational or conceptual – and in a way that is difficult to represent or re-articulate in written or spoken words (Bogue, 2003; Deleuze, 1986).

It is difficult to pin down the right way to think about filmmaking as organisational research. While scholars need to be aware of underlying assumptions associated with the various modes available – informational and conceptual or immersive and experiential – we need to find the conditions under which something new and original is produced – this may include new insights, imaginative scope and/or forms of expression – and be less concerned with essentialising the field at the moment.

Provoke new thought

The application of research-led filmmaking to organisation studies leverages new ways of thinking about the so-called non-rational elements of everyday life, which are often missed by the processes of abstraction in written organisational analysis (Barry and Meisiek, 2010; Carr and Hancock, 2003; Darsø, 2004; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). Some prior work (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999; Taylor and Hansen, 2005; Warren, 2008) has drawn on various ideas and research streams from aesthetics to expand methodological and epistemological possibilities. Proponents have dealt with questions of 'passion' (Gherardi et al., 2007), 'beauty' (Adler, 2011; Ramirez, 1991) and 'creativity' (Styhre and Eriksson, 2008) in organisational settings.

Other voices (Bell and Davison, 2013; Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004; Denzin, 1991; Höpfl and Letiche, 2002; Linstead, 2017b; Steyaert et al., 2012; Wood, 2015; Wood and Brown, 2012; Wood and Rowlins, 2016) have drawn attention to the contribution film and video recordings could make to organisation studies. Filmmaking as organisational research holds certain types of bodily, affective and cognitive resources that can engage the viewer within first person experience 'being made' (Bergson, 1991: 150) rather than an external representation 'already made' (Bergson, 1991: 134). This kind of engaged, responsive understanding allows us to distinguish between thinking within and thinking about organisational life (Shotter, 2006).

For the purposes of theorising, Shotter argues, thinking about subjects, processes and contexts as outside of us, 'over there' might be enough. In this case, perceptions are states projected outside the body. But if our research aim is to engage with what we feel and what we see, then we can set ourselves to a dialogical relation with things, interact with these and thus be involved in a form of 'thinking-from-within' or withness-thinking (Shotter, 2006). Here, we move to meet our perceptual states; we are sensitive to them, feel a contact with them and have them affect us within our body (Deleuze, 1986).

As example, Shapiro (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997) describes her approach to filmmaking as 'producing a certain kind of experience in a motion picture medium' rather than with more abstract 'visual ideas' (p. 96). Here, the idea of film is not to portray something 'as is' but rather to count on the audience's reaction: suggesting that the film 'becomes' a work – and contributes – to the extent that it can stimulate some type of affecting, embodied and behavioural arousal. Our own modest attempts at something of this nature can be found in Salovaara (2014), Wood and Brown (2014) and Wood et al. (2016a).

In *Leadership in Spaces and Places*, Salovaara (2014) employs imagination and reflection in the pursuit of critical enquiry into the deep constitutive relationships between built spaces and leadership identity. The film uses interviews with subjects in a dozen different social spaces and

material places ranging from corporate offices to a church, theatre, abandoned houses and dock-yard. These are interactional rather than inquisitorial in nature and draw attention to the film's constructed rather than expository character. They contribute to reflecting or enacting a form of thought 'from within' (Shotter, 2006) that both communicates ideas about how different spatial, temporal and corporeal configurations perform leadership and conveys what it feels like to be there. The film does not raise 'a complete, "closed" argument' (Roscaroli, 2008: 35) to deliver an objective truth. Instead, its indexical bond rests on a construction of meaning (dialogue) that opens up between the filmmaker and the actual activities, events and characters in front of the camera, between the filmmaker and the film's intended text, between the viewer and that text, and between the viewer and the 'facts' on screen.

Lines of Flight (Wood and Brown, 2014; see also Wood and Rowlins, 2016) explores the tension between work and play. The film teases out a relationship between well-defined codes of behaviour that delimit working life and the leisure activity of solo rock climbing – ascending a rock face without using any ropes, harnesses or other protective equipment – which almost defies capture in any set of 'constraining' rules. From a sensory perspective, it invites the viewer to go beyond a general concern with the real characters and situations on screen and to pick these up as actual expressions of (bodily) sensations and intensities. This affect is implied, for example, in the sudden shock when the vertiginous of the climbs or the rhythms and the movements of the climbers, especially those of breathing, evoke a sensuous similarity within the viewer.

600 Mills (Wood et al., 2016a) engages with Schumpeter (1950) and his description of the dynamics of capitalism as a 'perennial gale' of 'creative destruction'. The context is the decline and recent retransformation of the textile industry in Melbourne, Australia, once home to over 600 knitting mills but now reduced to around ten in consequence of free trade policies and globalisation (Berkeley, et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2016b). However, re-articulating the ideas of Schumpeter in written or spoken words is not the purpose of the film. The object was not to reveal essential facts about creative destruction. The film does not depend on an argument based on logical reasoning. Rather, it connotes Schumpeter's thinking through the speech, gesture, and expression of various interviews, conveying those ambiguous and ambivalent moments of destruction and/or creation as a cinematic performance of thought (Sinnerbrink, 2016).

Film has a different relationship to and reveals different dimensions of the organisational world from exclusively written or verbal sign systems and thus affects the ways viewers see that world. If we take the view that the above films are doing research, we can recognise that each *enacts* rather than merely *records* the argument. Above all, we recognise that whatever the research content is in the narrative, each must communicate its thinking in cinematic terms.

More than conventional research

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994), art, philosophy and science have different concerns in regard to understanding and knowledge: philosophy is concerned with the 'form of concept', science with the 'function of knowledge', and art with the 'force of sensation' (p. 216). In turn, the extrinsic role or character adopted by each distinct discipline makes them, in a certain sense, irreducible to each other. But, as Deleuze and Guattari say, each maintains a continuous contact with the others in relation to the process of enquiry. The essential relationship between art, philosophy and science has consequences for how film could make an original contribution to organisational research. Taylor and Hansen (2005) argue that organisational scholars have tended to subtract from the mixture of art, philosophy and science to construct an understanding of phenomena only in intellectual terms, concerned with abstraction, with underlying principles and with rational processes/structures. But this division cannot be sustained. As Taylor and Hansen demonstrate, while

traditional intellectual approaches took on the science model to explain organisational events, the scientific explanation is also associated with experience, feelings, immediate responses and the aesthetic.

Taylor and Hansen's work shows convincingly that it should be possible to connect these different methods and practices in a fluid plane of activity. For example, organisational researchers use intellectual methods to talk about aesthetic forms just as natural scientists note that problems in science often yield to the assumption that the natural world has certain aesthetic features. This raises the question of how research-led films could solicit affective-emotional responses and convey something of the tacit dimensions of the organisational world (Taylor and Hansen, 2005).

Central to the debate is the issue of whether film meets either necessary or minimally sufficient conditions for 'doing' organisational research. A 'bold' thesis holds that film can contribute to research by 'means exclusive to cinema' (Smuts, 2009: 409). Here, 'means exclusive to cinema' could imply 'unique' to the medium; certain research ideas can *only* find cinematic expression. Livingston (2006) thinks this is an implausible idea because 'the exclusively cinematic insight cannot be paraphrased' (p. 12), and if the cinematic presentation is resistant to paraphrase, we must ask whether a film is actually doing the research.

The bold thesis is not the claim we wish to defend. This is because it sets the exclusivity requirement too high, and it is an unfair standard. Written and spoken work is not similarly evaluated, and the fact that we can state or restate ideas does not concern us. The possibility that research in films can be re-articulated is thus normal: we 'paraphrase' written or spoken texts all the time (Smuts, 2009).

A second objection by Livingston (2006) is that if we can say what the research contribution is, we need reason to think that the contribution is not wholly dependent on the linguistic medium. If a film's insight cannot be paraphrased, what grounds could we have for thinking that it is doing research at all? And if it can and must be paraphrased, isn't the research in the exposition, in the account, in the articulation, which raises the question of the purpose of making the film (Clough, 2008)? But if we accept Smuts' (2009) argument that film cannot be completely reduced to language, the idea is simply that it can do research in an interesting way – in short, by enacting a cinematic thinking (Sinnerbrink, 2011, 2016).

The disagreement above is about the limits of the research abilities of film. We characterise this divergence by drawing the distinction between a more conventionally theoretical and explanatory approach to organisational research and changing patterns of knowledge production, in which written language plays only a part. A problem is that presenting embodied, sensory knowledge through writing is difficult because experience cannot be broken down into the basic syntactical units that a written system demands (Warren, 2008). A key value in films is their ability to communicate experience implicitly and differently from exclusively written language (Glisovic et al., 2016). Glisovic et al. highlight how, to convey research insights, a film must be 'lived'. They speak of 'knowing through the senses; a knowing that happens via the body' (Glisovic et al., 2016: 9).

This seems close to the emphasis we place on film doing research in a way more 'cinematic' than merely recording a debate on a subject or simply illustrating a written discussion. Film can do research if it is capable of creating 'sensations of concepts' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 217), enacting meaning through gesture, body language and other sensory information rather than being an indexical sign pointing at what goes on in front of the camera. The claim that a film could help viewers know from within (the film), by sensations we term affective rather than knowing only from without, is central to our experiences of filmmaking.

In *Leadership in Spaces and Place*, the authorial intention was to situate the viewer in relation to particular locations: houses, architecture, furniture and interior designs – anything interviewees felt had an impact on them or their work. This played a crucial role in establishing a dialogue

between the viewer and the film's mediated world. However, while the actions of interviewees and their stories could be observed, it is important to remember that their affects could not be foreseen because the meaning or significance of film-images is often ambiguous and the response of each viewer subjective and varied (Candy, 2011). What emerges is a performative exchange between subjects, filmmaker and viewer, providing a way to reflect or enact a form of thought that both recognises the impact architecture, furniture and interior designs have on the working lives of subjects and puts the embodied spatial and temporal materiality around the viewer's *own* social and organisational life into question (Peltonen, 2014).

This kind of affective encounter may also be found in *600 Mills*. An interview with one of the key subjects gives an example of using cinematic means to express key elements of his personal memories beyond what can be understood from his spoken words alone. He is an older man talking about his life in textile manufacturing, a story of survival and resilience with many twists and turns. Initially conveying a demeanor of age and weariness, there are surprising moments when he is asked about how his business was saved. To emphasise the meaning and affect, a connection was made with his facial expressions, adding 'an element of incongruous humour that would be hard to convey without experiencing the tone of voice and the sparkle in the eye that occurs as it unfolds on-screen' (Berkeley et al., 2016: 12–13). Consideration of these films should not be focused solely on whether they eschew the traditional idea of the transparency of film and replace this with a performative process. Instead, we must give thought to what broader definition of understanding and knowledge we might apply to comment on what each film does cinematically. Our approach recognises the overlapping, blurring and multiplicity of elements that Deleuze and Guattari (1994) put forward. Here, distinct concepts, functions and sensations of thinking cross over into each other via the cinematic experience.

Production and distribution

In the prevailing economic and governance model of universities scholar identity is tightly bound by the choice of publishing options. Careers and futures are fastened to performance-based objectives, but current publication choices do not immediately allow academics to abandon existing traditions of thinking, methodology and/or practice and to see problems in a new way (Schilling, 2005; Potts et al., 2017). The closed circle of scholarly publishing may override any incentive to explore the nature and range of benefits and impacts arising from the field of film-based research. We challenge the disciplinary status quo in organisation studies, aiming to place film-based research on an equal footing to other types of research and research outputs in the field. In this effort, we cross extant boundaries using filmmaking as a means for breaking through into new domains of enquiry.

There are currently few outlets for organisational scholars who are interested in film-based research. We think it is odd to reject a research tool of immense potential simply to maintain the safe and secure word orthodoxy of conventional journal publishing. Rather than merely stating (or restating) the problem of how to achieve an academically acceptable space for film-based organisational research, via a written discussion – a bastion of normal science that does not easily accommodate multidisciplinary study or related multimedia outputs – we have done something different.

As filmmaker researchers, we have taken academic journals to task by demanding they address the lack of capacity for film-based research and help to value filmmaking as a research output. At an institutional level, alternative electronic-type journals have responded to the 21st-century need for academic research to be rigorous and publicly engaging, but we must also find voice in mainstream academic outlets. Above all, we need to establish the possibility that film-based organisational research can be published across a broad range of journals.

We also need information and examples of good practice that has already taken place and to ensure this can be expanded to the core of organisation studies as a whole. However, from the fact that established journals generally seem to be unable or unwilling to cope with film-based research approaches, it is clear we are a minority. At work here is what Bourdieu (1996) calls a system-based logic of 'hierarchisation'. For the most part, traditional paradigms and current standards in the field are potentially leading to the under-representation in submissions of research-led films produced by those researchers wanting to find their form in film.

One reason that filmmaking research is still in a state of flux is that, unlike the relatively stand-ardised measures for assessing the quality of published papers, judgements about how a film meets certain relevant criteria to qualify as research are not fully developed. As an evolving area, there are often inconsistencies at institutional level about how to assess film-based outputs as a key new element in research (Knudsen, 2016). Within the models that do exist, there is a range of approaches to the conceptual and logistical challenges involved. In response, organisational researchers have begun to develop a 'critical visual literacy' (Belk and Kozinets, 2005: 134) that may assist them to evaluate a film as easily as they now critically review a written discussion.

Despite Deleuze and Guattari's (1994: 164) emphasis that an art object, as we have implied with regard to film, 'must stand up on its own' to express and embody new understandings and/or knowledge, there is wide acceptance that, either for pragmatic or institutional reasons, a written text should be part of the research communication process. The additional text-based component is seen as interacting creatively with the film presentation (Glisovic et al., 2016) and provides 'guarantee' support for the research content of that work (Dovey, 2007). Film-based and digital media publications, such as *Journal of Video Ethnography* and *Screen Work*, have addressed the development of appropriate methods of peer review for research-led films. *Screen Work* makes peer dialogues available online for readers to see. Reviewers for the *Journal of Video Ethnography* can access both the film and an accompanying text-based statement to identify and explicate the research in the work (Shrum and Scott, 2015). Similarly, the *Journal for Artistic Research* looks at how multiple methods, media and articulations may function together to generate insights in research and argues for a relationship between a film and a written text that illuminates both works.

In assessing film-based outputs as an evolving area of organisational research, we believe that, just as written text encompasses everything from rough notes taken on the hoof to meticulously transcribed interviews, to wonderfully evocative accounts to laser-like theory and analysis, film can and should occupy the same range. So, please make a movie and submit it to a journal!

Conclusion

The intention of this manifesto has been to sketch the role and relevance of filmmaking for organisational research. Our investigation has been exploratory and necessarily selective. We have provided the basis for our claim that films can do first-rate scholarly work in the field.

Our assertion is that little rational reason exists to deny films can make a demonstrable contribution to organisation studies. We maintain that justifications for marginalising film-based research are often quite conventional: we have not done this before, why now? Traditional: reviewers and academia in general are not – yet – educated in evaluating film-based work. Emotional: you cannot be serious! Also, practical: how can the big commercial presses integrate cinematic forms of interpretation, like those sketched above, into journals, books and electronic media?

Going forward, filmmaking presents distinctive challenges to organisational researchers and a range of benefits for audiences and users at just the time when calls for academic research to have reach and impact have increased greatly. This, we believe, is not a minor task of organisation studies. It is our ethical (and critical) responsibility to try to expand the possibilities of where we might

encounter research, what that research might be made of, or be about and improve the quality of expression to enhance public engagement and understanding. By highlighting some starting points for discussion, we are hopeful that our manifesto will henceforth serve as a rallying point for future organisational researchers.

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