The Rhetoric of Research

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Abstract

In 1993 Christopher Frayling, the Rector of the Royal College of Art in London, published an article about the nature of research in art and design. The present paper revisits his threefold distinction of "research-in art, research-through art and research-for art", and considers why Frayling found the third category to be problematic. The analytical methods used are linguistic (a constructionist approach to the rhetorical effect of construing various prepositions with "research"), and philosophical (a Wittgensteinian approach, distinguishing between socially agreed normative criteria, and non-normative indicators or symptoms).

The paper argues that the instrumentality of terms such as "research" should be contrasted by observations of how the register of artefacts is used in the advancement of the field. If one adopts a constructionist approach then one is forced to be sceptical about the reification of publicly agreed criteria. The paper uses Wittgenstein's distinction between criteria and symptoms to identify three indicators of research that may point towards a solution to Frayling's problem through the re-description of his category "research-for" art as "a work-of" art.

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This paper approaches the debate about the nature of research in art and design from a linguistic point-of-view. It suggests that the way in which we employ language in our discussions affects the connotative meanings of the words. This applies not only to the meanings of terms such as "research", "practice" and "work" but also to their grammatical construal in phrases such as "research into practice", "practice-based research" and "a work of art". To this extent we could say that language constructs the concept of research rather than describing it. This would be a constructionalist interpretation (Hall 1997: 25).

When Frayling (1993) wrote about "research-into art", "research-through art" and "research-for art", he appeared to be reporting on three different activities within research, each having a different relationship between the researching subject and his or her object. However, the constructionalist approach would say that through this normative process, the three categories were brought into existence. From this point onwards it became possible to differentiate and therefore to compare, these categories. The constructionalist approach also implies another, bigger problem: to what extent is our whole debate about research in art and design affected by language? In particular, to what extent do some connotations affecting our judgement about what constitutes research arise *argumentum ex verbum* rather than *argumentum ex re*.

Methodologically, Frayling does not approach the problem of "research in art and design" as a "critical rationalist". Instead he paints us a picture, deriving his imagery from popular culture, especially the cinema. This is not an inappropriate method for establishing how many of our prejudices and assumptions have their roots in our use of language. Owing to the lack of an explicit argument about what research is, we are left to sort out the possible relationships between the key verbs, e.g. thinking, doing, writing, making, experimenting, reflecting, etc., and some value-laden adverbs, e.g. emotional, cognitive, etc. The symptoms, the "ex re", of research that Frayling identifies are; that the outcomes of research must be explicitly communicable to others, that practice includes writing, design, science, etc. and therefore cannot be used to differentiate between these activities, and that it is the relationship of "research" to "practice" as shown in the construal of the terms "research-into [a practice]", "research-through [a practice]", and "research-for [a practice]" that gives the term "research" its meaning (Frayling 1993: 1c, 5a).

It would perhaps be appropriate here to say something about the term "instrumental". Instruments are of various kinds but in general they serve as

tools with which to do something, e.g. a hammer, a barometer, etc. When we regard words as instruments we focus on their use and on what is achieved when we employ them. In this context we might regard the word "research" instrumentally if we attend to what is meant by a community of users of that word, "not with a view to discovering anything about the nature of the objects to which they seem to refer: rather, to find out whether there are such objects, and if so which objects they are" (Hunter 1990: 157). This seems to be Frayling's method: to consider the instrumental effect of cinematic representation on our perception of scientific and artistic activity. In these cases we can see that, far from the terms "research", "scientific" and "artistic" serving to focus on objective aspects of their manifestation on-screen, they become implicated in a reciprocal act of definition and interpretation. For example, we call Frankenstein a scientist, not because we see evidence of his scientific method but because his stereotypical behaviour is associated with the label "scientist". Words as instruments therefore do something: they modify our view of the world and, the constructionalist would say, construct our perceptions.

Since Frayling is concerned to ensure that our understanding of the term "research" in the field of art and design corresponds to its use by its inhabitants, it is appropriate that he should look at what
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they actually do. For example, rather than accepting or rejecting Picasso's assertions about his paintings *qua* research, Frayling considers how the actions of Picasso and others, e.g. Leonardo Da Vinci, Stubbs and Constable, might be described. If we labelled their actions as research, how would this affect our interpretation of these actions, and does this label need any qualification? Frayling's conclusion is that the term "research" can be employed when qualified by a prepositional triad of "into, through, for".

Frayling's examples of "research-into" art and design include historical and theoretical perspectives (1993: 5a). His examples of "research-through" art and design include materials research and action research. But he finds "research-for" art and design problematic because its examples would have to include artefacts that embody the thinking but fail to make explicit their knowledge and understanding. The problem that arises is an instrumental one: is it the case that there is no content to the classification of "research-for art and design?" If the community values Picasso's contribution, why is it not an example of "research-for art"?

This brings us to the concrete proposal of this paper. Instrumentally the community needs a term that describes and labels the activity that is equivalent to "research-for art and design". This is because it needs to describe how the discipline is advanced and how knowledge arises through practice, and this would seem to be unavoidably linked to the embodiment of thinking in objects. However, the implications of the models provided by

the construal "research-into" and "research-through" do not transfer into a useful instrument of "research-for". That is not a problem concerning the intrinsic character of research in the field, i.e. *argumentum ex re*. It is a problem concerning the extrinsic character of how it is described, i.e. *argumentum ex verbum*. Picasso was right to say

> the spirit of research has poisoned those who have not fully understood all the positive and conclusive elements in modern art (Frayling 1993: 2a).

Picasso claims that art is advanced or changed not by research, nor by unreflective practice, but by the creation of works which come to have influence. Their influential status is demonstrated by the effect they have on the field and not by what their creators intend or say about them.

Art and design is advanced using both text and artefacts. Agrest calls these "registers" (Agrest in Allen, 2000: 164). Each has the capability to represent some aspects of a concept but not others. These concepts are critically analysed by rewriting and remaking, etc. Agrest claims that neither of these registers is comprehensive, which is why art and design uses them both. Practice-based research also adopts this assumption. It assumes that neither writing alone, nor making alone, are sufficient to represent a whole concept. It would be easy to act as though theory is synonymous with text and practice is synonymous with artefacts. Allen (2000: xvii) recognises the potential tension between theory and practice that comes from the recognition of different registers. In response he argues that each register has the capacity to support both theory and practice, i.e. that one can analyse theoretical concepts through making and practical concepts through writing. He prefers the distinction between primarily "hermeneutic practices", i.e. those concerned with "interpretation and the analysis of representations", and "material practices" that "transform reality by producing new objects or organisations of matter". Because the publicly agreed criteria of research include a need for the communication and dissemination of outcomes, research is essentially a hermeneutic practice. This will be used later to explain the AHRB distinction between practice and research.

This distinction recognises the different merits and capabilities of the register of artefacts and the register of text. Text can state aims and other intentional activity, it can describe intangibles, abstract concepts, generals and universals, conditionals, negation. This is partly because text has a
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formalised syntax in a way that there is not a formalised syntax of objects (Wollheim 1980: §58). A formalised grammar allows us to understand novel ideas. On the other hand, ideas embodied in the expressive misuse of words, or the abuse of the conventional use of objects, may need an accompanying critique to contextualise what is being done, to turn disruption into understanding. Joyce's *Ulysses* was not accepted as a great work when first

published. While its disruptive value may have been highly regarded from the outset, its contribution to knowledge was recognised when it was able to be placed in an historical, cultural and critical perspective. Whether one wishes to then say that the contribution to knowledge was implicit in the work, or one prefers to say the contribution was made by the critique that explicated it, is an example of different applications of the criteria of research.

Criteria and Instrumentality

This paper has claimed that Frayling's categories of "research-into", "research-through" and "research-for" art can be conceived as instrumental rather than descriptive of the problem of research in art and design. If this is the case, how might one proceed to discuss the concept of "research-for" art and design? The problem may benefit from Wittgenstein's distinction between criteria and symptoms.

Criteria function normatively and constitute the rules for the application for a term. These rules are part of our form of representation. Confusions between criteria and symptoms arise when the form of representation is applicable and supportive of one grammatical proposition, but not supportive of another which appears to have the same structure. For example, first-person assertions of sensations such as "I am in pain" are regarded by Wittgenstein as a symptom of pain for the utterer, because of the lack of publicly available evidence. On the other hand, third-person assertions such as "she is in pain" are made on the basis of observing pain behaviour. Such behaviour is one of many possible criteria of her pain for us. Another criterion might be her avowal "I am in pain" (Biggs 1998: 9).

We might use this to distinguish between criteria for research, and symptoms of research. Criteria would be the socially agreed definitions published by universities and research councils. Even if one regards them as unsatisfactory, gaining an award requires one to conform to the publicly stated criteria. They also give a means of appeal in cases of dispute. However, if we now want to criticise the influence of these criteria from a constructionalist point-of-view, then we are forced to abandon them because of their social instrumentality and look instead for non-socially agreed symptoms.

One criterion of research is that it is particular type of process. This is the model adopted by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB):

> The Board's definition of research is primarily concerned with the definition of research processes, rather than outcomes. This definition is built around three key features and your application must fully address all of these in order to be considered eligible for support:

- it must define a series of research questions that will be addressed or problems that will be explored in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of answering those questions or reporting on the results of the research project

- it must specify a research context for the questions to be addressed or problems to be explored. You must specify why it is important that these particular questions should be answered or problems explored; what other research is being or has been conducted in this area; and what particular contribution this particular project will make to the advancement of knowledge, understanding and insights in this area

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- it must specify the research methods for addressing and answering the research questions. You must state how, in the course of the research project, you are going to set about answering the questions that have been set, or exploring the matters to be explored. You should also explain the rationale for your chosen research methods and why you think they provide the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions.

The AHRB definition of research provides a distinction between research and practice per se. Creative output can be produced, or practice undertaken, as an integral part of a research process as defined above; but equally, creativity or practice may involve no such process at all, in which case they would be ineligible for funding from the Board.

The final paragraph reinforces the difference between research and some kinds of practice. It does so on the basis of whether or not the practice embodies the research process, rather than assuming that only the register of text has that capacity. This complements Allen's view that both the register of text and the register of practice have the capacity for theory and practice.

Implicit in the AHRB definition are some symptoms of research. For example, in order to meet the above criterion the research method must be applied systematically. Systematic, in this context, does not just mean organised and following a particular pattern or routine. Research is systematic in the sense that it is comprehensive. At the end of a period of research one is entitled to make claims because one has undertaken a rigorous enquiry that will have identified the current state of knowledge and the key players and ideas, and have provided some critical commentary or added to this. One can have confidence in the outcomes because an appropriate method will have been applied systematically resulting in an analysis from a coherent point-of-view. The enquiry is thus comprehensive from this point-of-view rather than necessarily aspiring to cover all that is known or could be said about a particular issue. It becomes a symptom of art and design research that a point-of-view or interpretational stance is made explicit, from whence the research can be judged as systematic and comprehensive. Other research on the same topic may adopt a different point-of-view. This is important for art and design because, contrary to the AHRB definition, research in this field only aspires to answer research

questions that arise in a particular interpretational context. It does not aspire to provide answers on the "objective" scientific model.

A second criterion of research is an explicit method. Within the research one might expect to find a defence of the coherence and appropriateness of the method to the issue that is to be investigated. For example, a problem of interpretation might be researched using a comparative historical method based on case studies. A recent example from the University of Hertfordshire investigated the use of allegory in sixteenth century painting and compared this with its contemporary use. Two methods were immediately apparent. the first was to undertake a linguistic analysis of the term "allegory" in these two periods and to use this knowledge as a method for structuring an iconographic comparison. The second was the reverse: to undertake an iconographic analysis and use this as a method for structuring a linguistic comparison. The outcome of the first would be insights into imagery and the outcome of the second would be insights into the use of words and concepts.

A linguistic analysis might show changes in both the meaning of allegory and its context as a mode of explanation, between one period and another. This linguistic method would be the context against which imagery could be evaluated, i.e. the relationship of the imagery to that which is to be explained. An iconographic analysis, on the other hand, would begin with the signifying elements of the imagery and conclude in observations about the use of the term. In either case, clarity about what would constitute the evidence to be analysed either linguistically or iconographically is essential for coherence. Equally authorities or counter-arguments that are relevant to each analysis
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should not be transposed. One implicit symptom of the chosen method is therefore that it must be appropriate to the kind of outcomes that are sought, and the evidence used, which in turn reflects the audience that is targeted.

An explicitly identified audience becomes a third symptom of research. Research must identify an issue that is consequential for an identifiable group in the field. This is why an investigation into one's own practice is not necessarily research unless it can be shown that the outcomes are transferable to other cases (the "research context" in the AHRB definition above). This need is reinforced by the requirement for all research to have some form of dissemination. This dissemination, by publication or exhibition, etc., would be irrelevant if there were not an audience for the content of the research. Of course, the target audience may not know they are the audience, or may not know that they would benefit from the outcomes of the research. One might say that the audience either *would* or *should* read or view the research because if they did then the outcomes would have an influence on their practice. This obligation should not be

read as the moral benefit of being widely informed, but the practical benefit of being specifically informed about developments in one's field. The size of the group, especially if it can be explicitly identified, is an indicator of the potential impact of the research. Funding bodies seek research that will be significant both in terms of qualitative and quantitative impact. For example, the AHRB asks referees to comment on: "value for money"

The peer reviewers will assess the proposal on the basis of its academic merit, taking into account:

> - the significance and importance of the project, and of the contribution it will make, if successful, to enhancing or developing creativity, insights, knowledge or understanding of the area to be studied

> - the appropriateness, effectiveness and feasibility of the proposed methodology, and the likelihood that it will produce the proposed outcome in the proposed timescale

> - the ability of the applicant(s) to bring the project to fruition, as evidenced not only in the application itself, but in their previous track record, taking account of their 'academic age'

> - value for money, and in particular the relationship between the funds that are sought and the significance and quality of the projected outcome of the research.

With each explicit criterion there are a number of implicit symptoms. Criteria should present necessary and sufficient conditions but as a result also operate instrumentally. Symptoms are indicators that such conditions are being met. They are neither necessary nor sufficient, and because of this tend not to operate instrumentally. Returning to the problem posed above, how can this distinction be used to explain why Frayling's category "research-for" art is problematic? The problem for him is that examples would include artefacts that embody the thinking but fail to make explicit their knowledge and understanding. But we do have a term for such works: they are "works-of art".

A "work-of" is characterised by becoming the object of study and cited by researchers. A "work-of" systematically employs a method that results in a novel point-of-view. It deploys it rather than commentating on it. Thus it is embodied or deployed in the work rather than explicated by it. The function of research is the opposite: to explicate rather than, or in addition to, embodiment; to make explicit that which is implicit. This has the effect of demonstrating to the examiner or the consumer of the research that the researcher understands what is embodied. This crosses over into the rôle of authorial intention since a "work-of" may embody any number of potential points-of-view, any or none of which may have been the intention of the author. However the legitimacy of claiming embodiment is not a claim of intention but a claim of coherence, and whether this point-of-view can

legitimately or coherently be explicated as being embodied or deployed in the "work-of". Such a claim needs to be made explicit by "research-into" the "work-of", and may be undertaken by the

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author of the work. The fact that notions of habitus are said by Bourdieu to be embodied in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* does not require him to claim that this was Kant's intention.

"Works" that have a significant impact in a field may also be grounded in research, e.g. Bourdieu's *Distinction* is a "work-of" aesthetics, but it is informed by thorough "research-into" the ethnography of French-Algerian society. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a detailed argument in favour of a particular systematisation of knowledge, but it rarely places this argument in the context of other thinkers. The lack of counter-arguments may be regarded as a symptom of a "work-of" rather than "research-into" a particular issue, e.g. the logic of our language.

The reason why Frayling's category of "research-for" is an empty set in art and design is because outcomes in this category are called "works-of". Such works advance the field and are likely to be cited as the embodiment of the field's knowledge. However, because they do not communicate this knowledge explicitly, Frayling's constructionist approach from the phrase "research-for" resulted in his conclusion that nothing met the publicly agreed criteria, rather than recognising that "works-of" exhibit appropriate symptoms instead.

Conclusion

A constructionist approach to language separates the material world from its symbolic representation in words. Meanings are constructed and validated at this symbolic level, with no necessary correspondence in the material world. This approach has been used to problematize the nature of research in art and design. Encouraged by the rhetorical approach adopted by Frayling, his category of "research-for" art has been reconsidered by distinguishing between the activities that are conducted in the register of text and the activities that are conducted in the register of artefacts or materials. It has been argued, from Allen, that these registers are not synonymous with theory and practice respectively. Artefacts therefore have the capacity to advance both theory and practice, but not necessarily on their own. Frayling is interested in the way in which the field of art and design is advanced, particularly through practice and the production of artefacts. Frayling constructs categories but then finds it difficult to account for the lack of content to the category "research-for" because his constructionalist approach has combined two language elements: "research" and "for". The criteria for research, and the implication of the rôle of artefacts in the construal

"research-for", is found to have no counterpart in the material world, i.e. the world of practice.

This paper has concluded that the linguistic turn that constructed the category "research-for" was misguided. It was led by a development of publicly agreed criteria rather than by underlying indicators or symptoms of research. This paper does not reject these publicly agreed criteria, but it does propose that they constructionally imply conclusions *argumentum ex verbum* rather than *argumentum ex re*, e.g. Frayling's conclusion. By reconsidering the indicators from the world of practice, and the need to find some equivalent to the category "research-for" by which the field is advanced, this paper argues that a better starting-point would be the phrase "a work-of". This phrase has the capacity to include the symptoms of research. It corresponds to how language is used in the field and what material practices are regarded as advancing it. However, it frees the constructionalist from the linguistic arguments that led commentators such as Frayling to conclude that the advancement of the field through artefacts, the business of "research-for art", was a problem.

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