
Research Blogging in Film Studies

By Nick Redfern

I began writing my weekly blog [Research into Film](#) in February 2009, largely out of frustration with film studies in general, and with publication processes in the discipline in particular. The *study of film* is a fascinating and diverse subject that includes analyses of film industries and technologies, textual analysis of films, ethnographic analyses of audiences and film consumption, and cognitive-psychological research into how we watch and experience films. Naturally, such a varied field requires a wide range of approaches and methodologies and it is the opportunity to engage with all these different aspects of the cinema that attracts me to research in this area. I am much less interested in *Film Studies*, which I find to be a narrower subject, with journals publishing research limited in both format and subject matter, which fails to reflect the true scope of the discipline.

My dissatisfaction derives principally from the limited range of research in film journals I encounter, and my blog is a response to these problems. In my discussion below I set out some of the advantages of research blogging in film studies in overcoming the narrow range of research in film studies in three areas: the ability to support a wider range of research, the ability to distribute research better, and to overcome problems of access and peer-review.

1. Blogging supports a wider range of research than film studies journals

The major change in film studies publishing over the past decade has been the increase in the number of journals devoted to the subject. Although the proliferation of journals produces more research, that research is not necessarily of higher quality or more pioneering in its use of methods. Nor does it cover a more diverse range of topics. There is little distinction to be made between print and online journals, since the latter seem intent on emulating the former in the pursuit of status rather than being truly innovative publishers. Nor has there been any reduction in the cost of print journals, which remain prohibitively and unnecessarily expensive.

The expansion in the number of journals has not lead to an expansion in the types of research published, and, in my opinion, there are now too many journals that are too similar to one another. Film journals publish a narrow range of research forms, dominated by interpretative essays around 6000 words in length, and are characterised by a performative

dimension in which they are little more than platforms for scholars to show off their work. There is very limited scope (if any) for publishing opinion pieces, shorter empirical studies, reviews of research, and methodological articles.

The lack of variety in research outputs constrains the type of work possible in film studies. The majority of film journals are unable to cope with new or different approaches to research, even if those approaches are elementary and routine in other disciplines. For example, it is incredibly difficult to get papers using statistical methods accepted into peer-review processes in film studies journals, let alone accepted for publication. On several occasions I have had research rejected on the grounds that it is not worth progressing to peer-review because the readership will not be able to understand the methods employed. This is not a healthy state of affairs. The most important quality of any academic journal is originality, and a film journal should be ahead of its readers with a mission to bring them interesting and challenging research. The unwillingness of the major journals in film studies to fulfil this role is symptomatic of the comfort-zone into which film studies has retreated now that it has become ensconced in academia. I, for one, am unhappy that research is potentially being kept from me because someone else thinks I might not be *au fait* with some method or topic. I would much rather be able to decide for myself.

The principal advantage of research blogging is that there is no limit on the kinds of work I can publish. I can publish work of any length, ranging from just a few hundred to several thousand words, depending on the needs of my subject matter and how I want to write about it. I can write about theory or produce empirical research, mixing different types of writing from formal research to journalist-style reports or personal recollections. I can express opinions about film policy, the state of film studies, or the relationship of film studies to media studies; or I can discuss research methodologies relating to statistical practice, modelling narrative logic and viewers' beliefs, and the practicalities of genre research. I am bound by nothing more than my own desire to study film in any way that captures my imagination. The freedom of a blog is its greatest virtue for the researcher encouraging the 'many-sided thinking' that is better able to reflect the true scope of the discipline and the different types of research needed to explore such a varied field. This freedom extends to the reader whose exploration of film studies is not limited by the apparent low opinion of their readers held by journal editors. Blogs published either by individual researchers or hosted by universities or research centres are increasingly the first place of publication for new research, and so, not only can the reader find a wider range of research, they can access it long before it reaches the pages of a journal and for no cost.

2. Blogging fulfils a curatorial role in disseminating research

Catherine Grant has demonstrated with [Film Studies for Free](#) that a blog is the best method for collecting and disseminating research within film studies. Indeed, this is the original purpose of a *web log*. It is also the best method for bringing research produced outside film studies to the attention of film scholars. There is a great deal of research on the economics, psychology, sociology of the cinema that never makes its way into film studies. This has two consequences: first, much valuable research that could enhance our understanding of the cinema is overlooked; and second, film studies articles tend to be homogenous, presenting the same arguments supported by the same references, and do not reflect the true diversity of the subject. This includes research in economics, management, geography, neuroscience, physiology, communication studies, and marketing that falls within the 'study of film' but typically not within research in 'film studies'.

One area in particular that has been overlooked is multimedia analysis. Since the early-1990s the need to manage sizeable databases of video material has produced a large body of research on summarising and indexing multimedia content that has direct relevance to film studies. On the one hand this research produced new methods and technologies for analysing films in terms of their editing, camera movement, use of colour, staging and framing, and sound. The use of statistical models in particular could have led to substantive advances in this research area in film studies. At the same time, attempts to create video indexing systems have required an understanding of the relationship between the attributes of films (i.e. its content and style) and the responses of viewers, and has focussed on the relationship between form and content (the 'semantic gap') and form and emotion (the 'affective gap'). For example, Hanjalic (2006) provides an interesting overview of *affective content analysis* discussing the relationship between the extracted formal attributes of multimedia texts and the emotion-based terms used by viewers in selecting films, going on to illustrate how this can form a basis for enhancing recommendation algorithms used by video-on-demand companies in reaching their customers. Multimedia analysis thus combines formal analysis with attempts to model film spectatorship and links these to the economics and technologies of media companies.

This research also brings fresh eyes to old topics in film studies, as we can see in Brett Adams (2003) discussion of *denotation* and *connotation* in the production of meaning or in Chita Dorai and Svetha Venkatesh's (2001) model of how relationships between primitive-level stylistic attributes create high-level semantic constructs. Though it may use methods utterly alien to film studies, this research clearly falls within the scope of the study of film and can make a substantial contribution to film

studies. At present this is a valuable body of research ignored by film studies, and is even overlooked by cognitive film theorists.

One of the objectives behind *Research into Film* is to make this research available to film scholars who would not, as a matter of course, think to look in journals such as *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia*, or *IEEE Signal Processing Magazine*. The vast majority of this research is available on the Internet, had anyone the time to look for it. It is a great failing of film studies that there is no systematic collection and distribution of this research and that it is left to individual bloggers to fill this gap. A more systematic, and better publicised, approach would make a substantial difference to the range and quality of research in film studies. We would be in a far better position to make advances in our understanding of the cinema if journals were amenable to accepting review articles of relevant research from outside film studies.

3. Blogging promotes better access and is more transparent than traditional journals

Social media threatens the role of traditional, offline, or subscription only journals. Their audience of these latter is limited by their very high price, and restricted availability, and also by their leaden-footed production processes based on peer-review practices that are obscure and very often of poor quality (even for the most respected of journals).

This can have a negative impact on the contribution of research beyond academia. In October 2011 I attended a symposium on research and policymaking for film in the UK. I've [blogged about it](#) at length, but one key point was repeated by several delegates: the time scales of academia are out of synch with the demands of industry and government, and the slowness of the publication process is a contributing factor to this. Academics need to publish research in respected journals in order to obtain employment, promotion, and status. Furthermore, it is now incumbent upon researchers in the UK when applying for research grants to demonstrate the public (i.e. economic) benefit of their research. But the ability of researchers to participate in a policymaking process is determined, in part, by the timeliness of our contribution, and the lengthy time lag between submission and publication of research can preclude the effectiveness of any intervention. Film journals are good places to discuss the history of film policy, but they are unable to play an active part in policymaking processes.

With a blog I can communicate with an audience quickly and directly, at a publishing cost to me of zero and in a form that is accessible to my readers for the same price. Crucially, a blog encourages participation in

what is happening now, as well as being a forum for distributing longer-term research. It is a particular advantage of a blog that it is flexible with regard to a number of time domains — the ‘here and now’ and the ‘then’ — while journals are restricted to looking backwards. For example, my article on regional and global film production in the UK (Redfern 2010) was rendered obsolete days after publication by the announcement of the abolition of the UK Film Council. But by then, the [draft version of that article](#) on my blog had been available to read for over a year. The journal article goes on my CV, but it is the blog post that is distributed and discussed.

Blogs are an intermediate research forum - they are both personal to the author and publically accessible, existing somewhere between a first draft and the finished article. We should encourage such forums beyond blogging, too, as a means of rapid communication. For example, the [Globalization and World Cities Research Network](#), hosted by Loughborough University, promotes rapid access to publication/submission versions of original research by allowing researchers to post their work on a website. This network does not replace academic journals but it solves many of the problems of too rapid ‘research obsolescence’, encountered in conventional publishing, that I outlined above. It allows researchers to move forward with research while gaining recognition for their work. While not actually a blog, this network formalises many of the attractive features of blogging (variety, curation, access, openness), and should serve as a model for developing and distributing research in film studies.

At the same time intermediate forums encourage a more open, flexible, and rapid peer review process while also allowing for post-publication peer-review. The peer-review process across all academic disciplines has been much criticised of late, and needs to be refreshed with the introduction of new ideas. In 2011 the U.K. House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology reported that,

despite the many criticisms and the little solid evidence on the efficacy of pre-publication editorial peer review, it is considered by many as important and not something that can be dispensed with. There are, however, many ways in which current pre-publication peer-review practices can and should be improved and optimised ... Innovative approaches - such as the use of pre-print servers, open peer review, increased transparency and online repository-style journals - should be explored ...

Much of this is fundamental to research blogging, and traditional academic publishers could learn a great deal from how bloggers go about

publishing their research in an open and transparent manner that invites interaction, rather than the secrecy of blind peer-review with its potential for bias and conformity.

For example, it may be desirable for all research in film studies to be published alongside the comments of the peer-reviews. I have [discussed the peer-reviews](#) received for my research on my blog, both to illustrate the flaws in the process as well as to [engage more deeply](#) with issues raised by reviewers that I think are worth reflecting upon. Methods like these could make a substantial difference to the way in which the reader understands the quality of a piece of research, and are only possible through an online presence, such as a blog.

It may surprise the reader to find that I do not advocate abandoning academic journals altogether. Blogs are not a substitute for existing publication routes in film studies. But it is to be hoped that the impact of research blogging will lead to a transformation of the publication process in academia by speeding up their production process, adopting new forms of peer-review, promoting access, and reducing their prices. (1)

Research blogging certainly allows me the freedom to find what is interesting to me. It allows me to carry out original research without worrying about the limitations and demands of more traditional forms of scholarship, ones that do not necessarily coincide with what is good for research in film studies; to produce different types of research that engage with topics and use methods hitherto ignored within film studies; to reach a far larger audience than is possible with more traditional formats; and to do this in a way that allows the reader to share in those same freedoms. Sometimes it feels as if you are putting in a lot of effort for little reward. There is as yet no real recognition of blogging in professional, or research assessment, frameworks. And just because you write something doesn't mean anyone will read it. (2) Of course, no one is (or should be) obliged to read your blog; from a distance, you may appear to others simply to be shouting into the wind. But this is true of most research, and of most journals. Research blogging is just more a liberating way of doing what we do anyway.

Endnotes:

(1) Some interesting examples of how this may come about - including blogging - are discussed in Jaschik (2012).

(2) Arguably the most important piece [I have published](#) looked at the distribution of Arts and Humanities Research Council funding in film and television studies from 2003 to 2008 and the sudden drop in the proportion of female postgraduates receiving research grants in 2007 and 2008. Noone, however, has chosen to comment on this still unexplained fact.

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