

*Studies in Material Thinking*, <http://www.materialthinking.org>  
 Vol. 3 (November 2009), ISSN 1177-6234, AUT University  
 Copyright © *Studies in Material Thinking* and the author.

**Stephen A. R. Scrivener**  
 Director of Doctoral Programmes  
 CCW Graduate School  
 University of the Arts London  
[s.scrivener@arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.scrivener@arts.ac.uk)

**Welby Ings**  
 Associate Professor Graphic Design  
 School of Art & Design  
 AUT University  
[welby.ings@aut.ac.nz](mailto:welby.ings@aut.ac.nz)

**Abstract:** This text, introduction and “transcript”, is not intended to stand independently of the exegesis segment; rather it seeks to highlight some of the points at which practices of the material and the ideal are frequently understood as divided: between material novelty and new knowledge, doing and thinking, showing and saying, expression and explanation, *inter alia*. However, this highlighting is not undertaken to confirm these divisions but to question them, not by polemic or reasoned argument, but by exemplifications, *i.e.*, “transcript” and exegesis, of their interweaving and interdependence that points toward the viewing/reading of the research referred to, *i.e.*, the *Thinking Pictures* project.

**Key words:** making, thinking, interweaving, exegesis

## **Framing the typography extract from the exegesis of the thesis entitled *Talking Pictures***

### **Introduction**

The journal *Studies in Material Thinking* is concerned with publishing research that provides “more thorough explanations of creative method and more comprehensive analysis of creative thinking, material process and innovation.” Material thinking can be understood as the thinking that forms material. It can also be conceived as thinking supported and even resisted by material. Indeed, the forming of materials, for whatever reason or purpose, can be understood as entwining both the thinking out of forms and the shaping of the thought that forms. We might even speculate that material thinking leaves a trace or record of itself in the material that is formed. Here, then, we can see several legitimate subjects to be analysed and explained through studies in material thinking. However, this way of thinking places research outside of form-making processes; research is something that is done on form-making processes or their outcomes. In contrast, I am interested in the question of how form-making outcomes might be understood as contributing to new knowledge and understanding, *i.e.*, research, of form-making possibilities and potentialities (Scrivener, 2006). Sometimes material production appears as an outcome of material thought not thought before and concerns not only the application of material thinking to produce something, but the unfolding and, at its most radical, the revoking and redefinition of what Jacques Ranciere (2006: 74) has called a “a regime of identification”, which gives visibility and signification to a material practice,

determining what a practice outcome is, what that practice does and what one sees when confronted with its outcomes. Sometimes, then, material thinking yields material difference that makes a difference to how we understand a material practice, such as filmmaking, painting, *etc.*

I selected Welby Ings' doctoral project *Talking Pictures* for the special issue *Material thinking as document* because it appears to me provide a concrete exemplification of a form-making process and outcome that, in the above manner, expands the potentialities of its field, *i.e.*, short film. Taking this project as an example, the question then arises as to the form and function of material thinking as document. It would have been possible to begin to provide some answers to this question by interpreting the components of the project, particularly the exegesis. Alternatively, and this was the choice taken, the author himself could be asked to give an account of his position on this matter. What follows below is a manicured "transcript" of an email-based interview exchange between consumer and producer; manicured in the sense that exchanges of clarification and elaboration have been both excised from and edited into the final "transcript." The resultant text broadly covers three themes: the first concerns the project as work that renegotiates the boundaries of the art of short film; the second concerns the function and form of the exegesis; and the third concerns the relations between the several components of the "thesis", *i.e.*, film, exegesis, DVDs, exhibition, *inter alia*.

### Talking about *Talking Pictures*

**Stephen:** As noted above, I have been expounding a view of artistic research that starts from the proposition that some art changes our understanding of art. This kind of art is transformational, and I have described the work of art involved in its production as transformational practice. Since art is posited that changes art, art precedes any discussion of how art has been changed, but what distinguishes transformation practice from artistic research is the latter's commitment to giving intelligibility to the difference that is recognised as novel. Taken together the art you produced, the short film 'boy' and the exegeses referred to above, *inter alia*, satisfied my expectations of this theoretical mode of artistic research. Is this characterisation of artistic research meaningful to you?

**Welby:** Yes. This is a big bite to chew off but perhaps it illustrates what creative practice as a form of scholarly activity might do. It suggests perhaps that rather than 'contributing to knowledge' it changes our framework ... or to reference a piece of your writing that I found particularly profound... it changes our understanding. It is more than an artifact it is a renegotiation and this is why the exegesis is perhaps the most appropriate model to consider in explaining and contextualising what has been done.

However, in doing this, the thesis argued by example that significant parts of the exegesis might be in other than the written word. Thus the exhibition of artifacts, the discourse between image and explanatory notes that ran concurrently through the scholarly narrative (story) of the exegesis... and the narrated documentary on DVD B that appeared at the back of the written text (Shrine experiments), were voiced in a variety of media forms. These became by fusion, created works. By this I mean, the exegesis took on a voice of its own. This was a voice surfacing from the same source [the creator] as the film. In this regard the exegesis is not just written. Like the film it is also designed and directed. It is a created artefact.

**Stephen:** So to properly understand the work as artistic research it is necessary to consider all of these components as an entirety, but before considering the implication of fragmenting this whole for our purposes here, can you say a little more about what you mean by 'a renegotiation'?

**Welby:** I think renegotiation occurs on two levels in this thesis<sup>1</sup>. First, my intention was to renegotiate an established form of narrative in the pursuit of a new type of film that was constructed so (unlike most cinema) it continued to reveal layers of meaning through multiple viewings. I also sought to renegotiate the boundaries of ‘silent’ film, so I could design a unique method of telling an audience about a ‘mute’ protagonist, who thought in particular ways.

In addition to a renegotiation of film, renegotiation also occurred in the way the exegesis ‘told’ us about the thinking that shaped ‘boy’. Although we see a substantial proportion of the exegesis carried on the written word, it is heavily reliant on its discourse with the image. Images illustrate experiments and details but also cumulatively underscore that this is a project whose thinking is driven by, and realized through the practice of asking artistic questions. Images are not orchestrated as secondary to the written word. In many cases they consume whole pages (and double page spreads). At many points, the academic work is primarily ‘voiced’ by the descriptive and emotive nature of the image. This approach was designed to connect the ethos of the film with the subjective /analytical nature of the exegesis. (We might remember here, that the thesis, as a composite document was called Talking Pictures).

Thus the exegesis sought to renegotiate the voice of the scholar as it has traditionally been embedded in written academic form. The written text in this regard may be likened to a choral work that while understood as a single unit, orchestrates a concordance of voices.

The main voice of the exegesis appears on a white background. It is linear and engages with theories as well as reflection on practice. It continuously defines then examines responses to the questions that the development of the work is raising. However, a second voice concurrently speaks to us from the grey background that runs parallel to the main narrative. This second voice has a subtly more colloquial tone that offers an incidental commentary. It may be likened to another listener to the main narrative who adds additional information or explanation. This voice however, is not a form of footnoting (these appear in discourse with the main text). It is a voice that speaks entirely to images.

A third ‘voice’ in the exegesis is the heterodiegetic voice that introduces each chapter with a quote. This voice tells us about storytelling as a cultural undertaking. It references the ethos of the upcoming chapter, but also reminds us as to why the telling of these stories is important.

**Stephen:** Then in the renegotiation, or transformation as I have called it (although I prefer your term because it captures the idea that the work seeks acceptance, if not now, then in the future), the surprises are multiple – as film, as combination of the visual and textual, as scholarly voice, and as all of these things.

We are now almost ready, I think, to consider the exegesis extract published here, but before we do I’d like to clarify how the exegesis stands in relation to the idea of material thinking as documentation. In one part of your exegesis you talk about how you employ different media in different ways to ‘think out’ your project. The resultant ‘scaffolds’ of thought, *e.g.*, annotated sketches, *etc.*, might be viewed as documents of material thinking. However, although it draws very heavily on them, your exegesis is not such a document. Rather, and I think this is illustrated by what you say above, it is a carefully constructed kind of storytelling with a particular audience in mind. Would you agree?

---

<sup>1</sup> By thesis I mean the proposition or idea behind the whole project. The thesis for this PhD was made up of the film and documents of thinking collectively called an exegesis.

**Welby:** Yes. First I don't think of an exegesis as a form of documentation. It is a 'composed' work that accepts the designed artifact [film] does not make explicit all the thinking of the thesis. An exegesis might instead offer an account both of what was made and the thinking processes that contributed to its realisation. At its most profound it moves beyond documenting a journey. It takes us into the actual process of thinking, the 'indwelling' if you like of the thinker. If we understand a Ph.D. thesis as moving beyond the elegant re-orchestrations of what already exists, I believe it is our responsibility as scholarly creatives to both renegotiate by practice, and articulately elucidate our processes of thinking. This is because the research itself (rather than simply the created artifact) is the site of 'scholarship'.

**Stephen:** Of course, we cannot deal with the exegesis in its entirety here, so what follows is an extract selected on order to reveal both the claiming and making of contribution in artistic research.

**Welby:** That's fine, but of course this poses a problem. The thesis itself is intricately woven together, selecting a part of it automatically fragments the whole. Taking any segment out of it is like chopping out a piece of a closely woven tapestry. The thesis is not like some conventional Ph.D.s that may be viewed as individual chapters that can be extracted and published as discrete bodies of work.

That said, perhaps the following excerpt might illustrate part of the story of the transformation of ideas that underpinned the emergence of the artifact. If you access the whole thesis online<sup>2</sup>, you will see that preceding this section, the exegesis offered an in depth (and relatively theoretical) consideration of anti-language, typography and the marginalized. This served to position the experiments that appear in what we will now look at.

**Stephen:** So although we are taking one thing apart, hopefully we are making a useful other, *i.e.*, the introduction above, the discussion here and the exegesis extract, which is more a reflection on the function, structure and agency of the exegesis than its content. Am I right to infer that you hoped that the use of typography in 'boy' would contribute an expanded understanding of the issues referred to above and, if so, is it possible to illustrate this, perhaps with reference to the extract? Isn't it also the case that you sought to expand appreciation of the use of typography in film?

**Welby:** Yes. I was trying here to design a voice for a boy in the film who had been silenced by his community. This meant designing a new form of subjective, typographical treatment for a youth who was prostituting himself in public toilets, but living a completely different life in the 'overground' of a small town. To do this I conducted cultural and thematic close readings of the slang of New Zealand male prostitutes (bog speak).

In the film, the boy doesn't speak but we can see him thinking through words that aggressively flicker or poetically dissolve across the story. These two voices have their origins in seemingly contradictory themes of bog speak, its dislocated and brutal tone, and its prominent use of ecclesiastical metaphor.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/346>

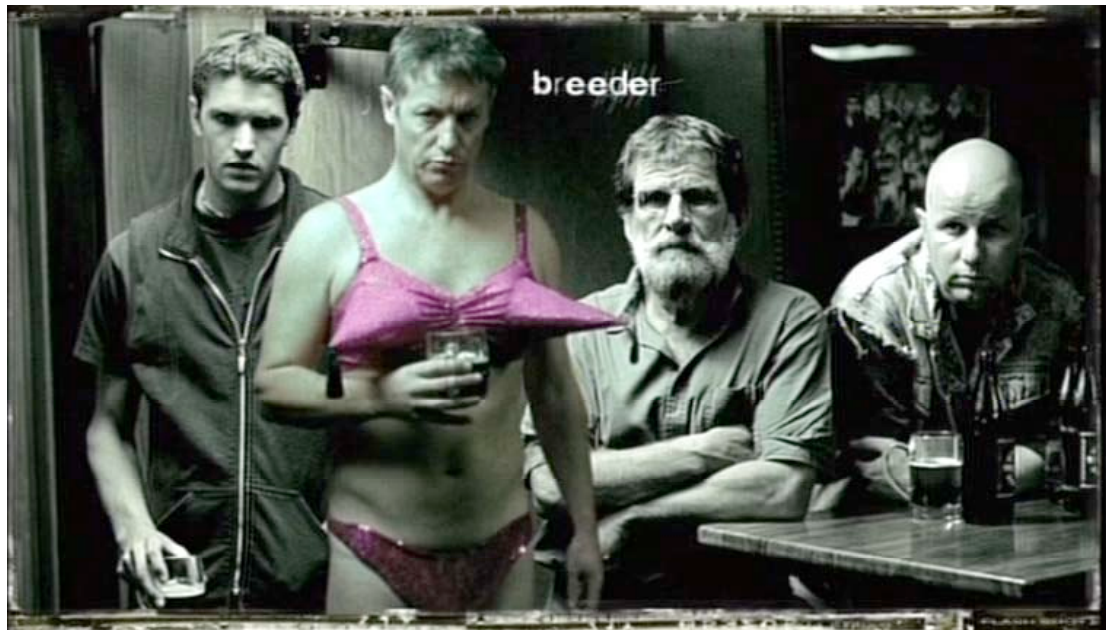


Figure 1. Application of type used to illustrate the brittle anger of the boy's interior voice.

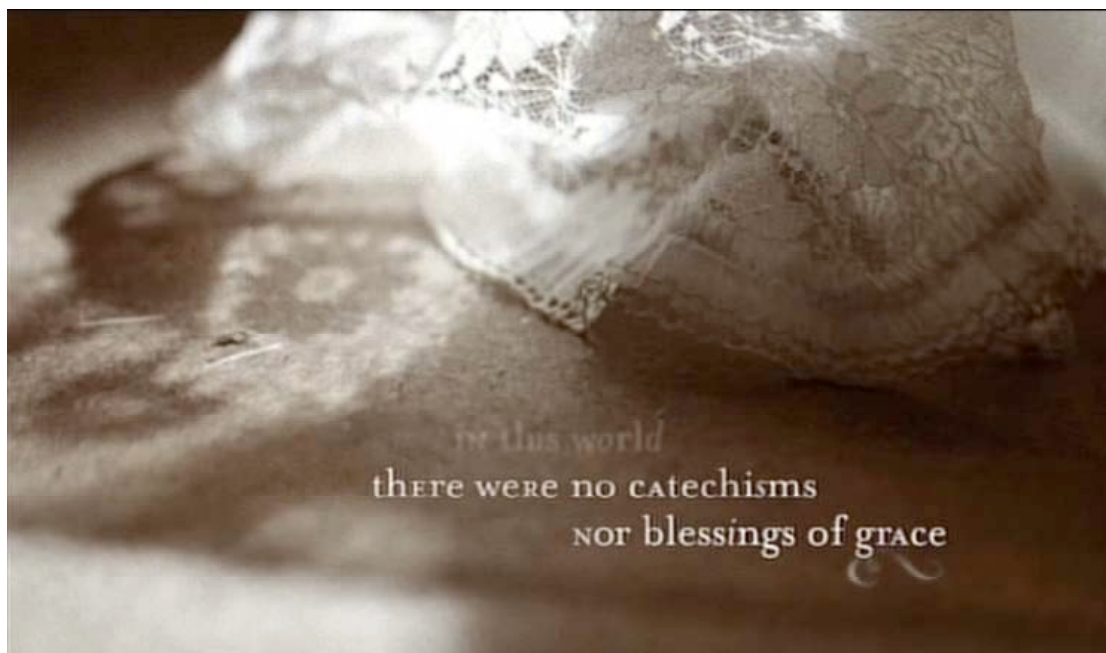


Figure 2. Application of type used to illustrate the poetic ecclesiasticism of the boy's interior voice.

The project therefore required that I found a way of creating typographical treatments that pulled the subjective and the paralinguistic into typography as a way of illustrating thought. In doing this, I was hoping (by example) to add to the broader discourse around typography through a demonstration of its applicability as a subjective voice in film.

But these things did not occur by solving of a defined brief or addressing a single question. The thesis was a highly integrated system of inquiry that dealt with the transformation of ideas, the self-conscious transformation of creator, and the gradual emergence and refinement of artefacts. This is why, when you read the exegesis you can see it is driven by questions. With each question, threads in a multidimensional weaving are connected or disconnected, new strands are imported and patterns tested. Through this process the work transforms and in so doing, transforms not

only the way we might think about typographic voices in short film, but also how one might narrate the process of that transformation.

**Stephen:** I do believe that your exegesis supports this claim. However, let's imagine that you had made 'boy' outside of an artistic research project. A scholar of film then takes 'boy' as an object of research and concludes that the film introduces a novel treatment of typographical voices in short film. This claim to new understanding would probably take a different form to your exegesis (although like your exegesis would be a construction of thought, rather than documented thought). However, it is not the form that interests me, but what it does. In this imaginary case, the new understanding is conveyed by means of a demand for agreement. What I'd like to suggest is that your work, and the work of other artistic researchers like yourself, is not a matter of arguing that something is the case, but of making something the case through artistic intervention. Or to put it another way, the value of the exegesis rests primarily on the value of the artistic renegotiation, or transformation. If the art work does not demand cognitive accommodation, then the value of the exegesis is reduced to that. What is your sense of this?

**Welby:** An exegesis is a unique scholarly form because it allows one to contextualise and explain ideas. But an exegesis for creative practice can go beyond this. It can allow a maker [designer] to bridge the generally disconnected gap between the 'intelligence of making' and 'the intelligence of the artifact'. These two things in tandem are the making of a new understanding. We are dealing here with the construction of thought rather than its careful documentation. This I believe is what moves such scholarship beyond description and critique and into the realm of transformational knowing.

That said. In this thesis the film 'boy' may stand as a discreet, self-defined artefact. It can function without the exegesis. The reverse cannot be said. The exegesis, as a document requires the film as a dimension of its articulation of thought.

**Stephen:** Welby, I feel that this discussion is very much unfinished business, as there are many other questions that I would like to explore with you: some prompted by this exchange and some not even asked. At present, there seems to be considerable agreement between us about the nature of artistic research, but it may simply be that we have not unravelled things sufficiently to uncover our differences. Nevertheless, we do not have space to go further and I do think we have gone far enough to set the scene for the extract that follows. Beyond this particular exercise, I do emphatically commend your thesis (i.e., film, DVDs, exegesis, etc.) to artistic researchers, even those working in creative fields other than film.

## References

Rancière, Jacques (2007) *The future of the image*. London: Verso.

Scrivener, Stephen. A. R. (2006) Visual Art Practice Reconsidered: Transformational Practice and the Academy. In: M. Mäkelä & S. Routarinne (eds.) *The Art of Research: Practice in Research of Art and Design*. Helsinki : University of Art and Design, pp 156-177.