

MULTIMEDIA & NARRATIVE

Michael Hallett FRPS introduces the new Multimedia and Narrative Distinction Panel, explaining that, while rooted firmly in The Society's past, it is very much a child of the 21st century

If The Society is to fulfil its role as a global leader in the art and science of photography, it has to keep abreast of current trends, and every once in a while make uncomfortable decisions. This is one such moment, where we need to extend the definition of what we call photography and imaging.

Photography has moved in fits and starts, mirroring new innovations and technologies since its inception, while The Society has been central to various debates to progress this change, since its formation in 1853.

We need to get the balance right. Photography has been developed through technological advancement, but while technology drives change, it is our responsibility to manage that change. William Henry Fox Talbot was instrumental in the development of early Victorian imagery. Later that century, George Eastman brought photography to the masses, and the Lumière brothers staged the first public screening of a motion picture in 1895.

The 20th century was dominated by two world wars, which moved materials and processes forward at an accelerated rate. The 21st century arrived, heralding digital processes and the democratisation of photography.

Now, a decade later, we are witnessing the convergence of still and motion capture. Interfaces between still and moving, time and motion, and audio and visual, are in a state of flux. While audio visual presentations on a large screen, and to an equally large audience, continue to have a place, there are new contenders - using a small screen and the web - and these have the potential to grow.

Sometimes it is possible to achieve maximum impact with minimum change. Other times, it is necessary to return to the original building blocks and start from scratch. On this occasion, and because we didn't previously embrace the problem as it was developing, it is necessary to return to the beginning.

I continue to expect us to enhance our game, but it was never going to be simple. While I am not a particularly political person, as a photographer I am most effective as a people watcher. Individual and collective emotional responses intrigue me, and this learning is part of my transferable skills.

In the voluntary arena, no matter how you dress it up, you are completely reliant on the goodwill of the individual which, if suddenly withheld, results in a degree of stalemate.

Bluntly, it can be Kafkaesque, but we have to live with it! However, I would acknowledge that normally the reality is one of support by the Distinctions 'family'.

Formed following the suspension of the Audio Visual Distinction Panel in September 2010, the purpose of the Time Based Media Working Group was to consider, 'The Society's interests in audio visual, and the current international standards, the well progressed culture for time based media in colleges and universities, the moving image sector, and the new technologies, particularly of convergence and the web.' Under my Chairmanship, the group met on 28 October 2010, and again on 24 March 2011, to consider its remit.

Its membership comprised: Andy Golding, University of Westminster; Dr Daniel Meadows HonFRPS, Cardiff University; Jonathan Shaw FRPS, Coventry University; Robert Albright FRPS and Ian Bateman FRPS, representing the RPS AV community and beyond; and Sandy Cleland FRPS and Nick Scott FRPS, representing the DAB. In supporting roles were Carol Agar, Andy Moore LRPS and Ben Fox ARPS.

The importance of this exercise was that we went outside our accepted domain, consulted external experts, and came up with firm recommendations. Individuals were invited to submit statements, and we specifically invited written comments, which were considered as part of the overall evidence.

The final report was written following the second meeting, as a collaborative response to these deliberations, and submitted to the Distinctions Advisory Board and Council in July.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- The proposal is profoundly simple: This new Distinction will look at a considered object (or objects) that needs to be seen over time, using the new tools of visual literacy. The evidence will include a structured statement of intent. The entire discussion is related to making this main recommendation effective.

- A new umbrella Distinction Panel be formed and delivered, called Multimedia and Narrative, where the title shows a combination of process and content. 'Narrative' in the title is important, as it emphasises the universal storytelling element of all sectors under this umbrella.

- Within this umbrella, we recommend three

specialist sectors: Audio Visual, Moving Image, and Multimedia. This fulfils what appears appropriate when taking into account the current state of imaging technologies.

- The recommendations are in line with other Distinction Panels, allowing for the assessment of work at Licentiate, Associateship and Fellowship, and for progression through The Society's Distinctions.

- The structured Statement of Intent at Associateship and Fellowship will state the intention of the artist/photographer in producing the body of work, and provide a platform on which to assess the work. While the statement will probably be reduced to a minimum, it should provide an outline/script/storyboard, and show the order in which things happen, and how the applicant developed the work and arrived at the finished outcomes.

- The Panel will be looking for evidence of the way the project was conceived. Applicants will demonstrate and describe their own creative input, not just rely on equipment to do this for them. This attention to good practice will provide a coherent and focused view of the work.

- The identification of the target audience is an element of the Statement. For the majority of applications, the Distinction Panel is the audience, but it could be that a different audience may be envisaged.

- The working group acknowledges that these recommendations will open up opportunities for The Society to offer its exemption and accreditation routes to a new audience.

- There are no technical barriers, in production format or display devices, subject only to the practicalities of the assessment process and venue.

- The Working Group acknowledges that a digital delivery platform can vary from large screen to a television, from tablet to personal device, and this may, in time, change the assessment process. Currently, all platforms must be part of the commonality of the Distinction process.

- In line with all other Distinction Panels, the anonymity of the candidate should be seen as good practice. The candidate will not be identified at any level, and will not be present at Fellowship level. It is acknowledged that the work of some candidates could be known to Panel members, and the Working Group is aware of strict processes in place to deal with this.

- There will be no debriefing on the day, and the process of feedback will be in common with other Distinction sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN PRACTICE

Of course, there are interlinking elements to the various sectors, and it is precisely this that should make these recommendations work. AV and motion pictures share many common properties, such as the use of narrative, music, timeline editing and casting. The rapidly growing convergence of technology in digital cameras and AV software could facilitate a combination of still and motion image making.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- While it is understood that The Society's mission statement acknowledges a membership consisting of those that make photographs and those that use photographs, this inclusive attitude could be promoted more effectively.
- There appears to be a culture that places too great an emphasis on looking at the quality of individual images, rather than considering the body of work as a whole ... There is a need to acquire a new understanding, and to be open to new ideas and ways of looking at work.
- The candidate should be navigating meaning, and the need to concentrate on the interpretation of images in their context. This could provide a reinterpretation of previous work, a creative reworking, or a repurposing of content - not just copying the photographs, but providing new value to the original photography.

ACKNOWLEDGING CONCERNS

In supporting this notion, it was agreed that, within the umbrella of Multimedia and Narrative, an application would consist predominantly of the candidate's own images, alongside the potential use of third party images.

- The working group acknowledges the concerns expressed by the AV Group and members of the former AV Distinction Panel, and wants them to be reassured that equal care and attention will be given to assessments. It further acknowledges there are changes to the requirements, but would expect these to be seen as an enhancement of the Distinction process in this sector, and of particular benefit to the applicant.
- The working group is aware that, in making these recommendations, it is asking the AV community to accept change in its current working practice, with the expectation that the Distinction process itself can accept a broader interpretation of photography and, in particular, the use of third party images.

NEW CREATIVE CONSTITUENCY

This is not just a way of revalidating audio visual, but is a new creative constituency that is very much a child of the 21st century.

- Where the copyright belongs to others, full attribution and moral integrity should be part of the process. There is a responsibility and duty of care to those represented in the work, as well as a need to follow legal procedures that applicants at all levels should be aware of, and reference should be made to this in the Statement. Applicants should approach this positively, and explain briefly how this has been achieved.
- Where there is a collaborative presentation, the candidate must indicate the extent of this collaboration.

GOOD PRACTICE

When you have change as extensive as this, there has to be a ripple effect across photography and imaging. In providing a specific direction for this new Distinction Panel, the Working Group came up with recommendations that it sees as good practice over a broader spectrum.

In acknowledging the rapid advancement in photographic technologies, particularly the convergence between still and moving image capture and editing, the report recommends that all picture based Distinction Panels consider this element within their individual remit.

Additionally, it recommends that good practice with regard to moral rights could well be brought to the attention of all Distinction Panels. This is suggested for guidance, and is consistent with our changing times.

MAKING IT HAPPEN ...

While the Working Group understands there is not a backlog of people waiting to apply, it also understands that the AV community has an immediate constituency, and that there are those awaiting the new regulations before they consider applying.

The anticipation is that Multimedia and Narrative will require only one Distinction Panel for the foreseeable future, and that membership of that Panel should be broad enough to encompass this global scope. The Distinction requirements will be on The Society's website from early this month, and updated as appropriate.

MANAGING CHANGE

While we have agreed the new direction, managing the change is going to be the most demanding bit. These Distinction requirements are going to evolve and develop with experience, and will require continuing adjustments, indicative of good and expanding practice. We are going to have to remain flexible and open to change, particularly taking into account the parameters of technological diversity that we expect this Panel to embrace.

On my watch, there can be no place for dogmatism or muddled thinking. Sometimes we must think outside the conventional parameters of 10, 15 or 20 prints on the wall at a Distinction assessment. This is precisely what we are doing here. Being protective or passionate is not part of my vocabulary, but I acknowledge there are those who feel the need for both.

The new Multimedia and Narrative Panel will be operational from early 2012, with provisional meetings scheduled for early April.

PANEL MEMBERSHIP

We are announcing the Panel's membership now, to show The Society's continuing commitment, taking into account where we are now and where we are going. The Panel's membership encompasses a breadth of experience. Its Chair for the first two years is John Chamberlain FRPS, who brings to the role extensive experience, as a visual art photographer, and as a Chair of Distinction Panels. The remaining members comprise:

Ian Bateman FRPS, Keith Brown FRPS, Richard Brown FRPS, Peter Hayes ARPS, Jonathan Shaw FRPS, and Graham Sergeant FRPS.

Over the next few months, they will be sitting in on other panels, to ensure maintenance of standards. Others could be invited to contribute as the Panel progresses. Nothing is static. Additionally, external members of the TBM working group have indicated their willingness to act as advisors to the fledgling Panel.

MULLING IT OVER ...

It is the mixture of history and sheer opportunity that really intrigues. This has the potential of moving The Society's Distinctions forward in a manner not achieved since the introduction of the Licentiate a generation ago.

How would Eadweard Muybridge, E J Maray or Harold Edgerton respond to Multimedia and Narrative? Would photographic effects from the original *Doctor Who* television series fit into this category? How long will it be before a Distinction could be web based, or developed around an app?

There are myriad courses within further and higher education taking in elements of both time based media and multimedia, and opportunities to open up routes for Licentiate and Associateship must be contemplated. Exemption must be high on our agenda. There is a potential for new membership here, which we ignore at our peril.

This is, in part, The Society offering an enthusiasm and relevance for a younger membership, be they students, apprentices or interns.

Progress will always be the preserve of those who are capable of capturing a certain vision. There is a time for change and a time for taking stock, but never a time for standing still.

This is the way of the world, and something that those shouldering responsibility should always consider. History has shown that some have left a substantial legacy, while others, for various reasons, have provided more of a caretaking role.

We should consider the past, to provide a dialogue with the present in order to shape the future. We have accepted a social responsibility to make this progress.

We are never going to please everybody all of the time, and for some there has to be an element of trust. There are no guarantees, but I hope the membership will see we are providing a platform that will take the Distinction process forward. In making its recommendations, the Working Group was '... aware of the fundamental change this could make to The Society's Distinctions', and was '... confident this will enhance The Society's profile, and appeal to new sectors of the public.'

Of course there is an element of risk, particularly where the future can be little more than a fuzzy notion, but I'm convinced that the safeguards in place will ensure we maintain and enhance the scope, quality and cohesion of our Distinctions. We are shaping, rather than just playing catch up with, photography.

**Michael Hallett FRPS,
Chair, Distinctions Advisory Board**