**THESIS BY CREATIVE WORKS**

**by Simon Moss**

Many PhD or Masters by Research candidates will complete empirical research. They might administer surveys, conduct interviews, extract DNA, analyze water, observe fauna, or review the literature, for example. They would then analyze the data and construct a written report.

Some research candidates, however, will instead produce some creative work, coupled with an exegesis, in which they defend this creative work. This alternative is often called a thesis by creative works. This variant is not restricted to creative artists but is also available to engineers, IT specialists, or indeed any discipline in which candidate might generate some tangible artifact, product, or invention. This document offers some guidelines around theses by creative works.

**When is a thesis by creative works appropriate?**

The following table presents some examples of the range of creative works in which this alternative might be appropriate. The first column specifies the kinds of creative works that candidates might produce. The second column specifies the settings in which these creative works might be displayed or demonstrated.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Kinds of creative works | Settings in which these creative works are typically displayed or demonstrated |
| Literature: a novel, play, or series of poems | A book launch, recital, or performance |
| Musical composition or performance | A performance |
| A film | A screening |
| An exhibition of visual art | An exhibition |
| A theatrical performance | A performance |
| A digital or multimedia work | A demonstration |
| An invention | A demonstration |

As this table reveals, a thesis by creative works may be suitable in a range of circumstances. Indeed, whenever the candidate wants to create some artifact or object for an audience outside academia, this approach could be considered.

**What are the contents of an exegesis?**

Candidates need to accompany this creative work with an exegesis. For a PhD, the exegesis is a written document, usually comprising between 30 000 and 50 000 words, that explains this creative work. The following table offers some insight into the main contents of a typical exegesis.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Contents of an exegesis | Possible details to include or questions to answer |
| Description of this creative work | * What does this creative work entail? * For example, does this creative work entail features that are not immediately visible or conspicuous? * What are the unique features of this creative work |
| The purpose of this creative work | * Was this creative work developed to solve a problem or overcome the shortcomings of previous works * How could this creative work shape the assumptions or perspectives of individuals? * How can this creative work help people, communities, or society? * How could this creative work help the candidate? * Does the creative work achieve these goals or purposes? If so, how? If not, why not? |
| The development of this creative work | * How did the creative work evolve over time? * What were the main phases or activities? * What are the key choices or decisions the candidate needed to reach? * What knowledge, skills, experiences, or events guided, informed, or shaped these choices? |
| How is creative work similar or different to other works in this field | * What are the movements, paradigms, theories, or precedents that inspired this work? * How does this work diverge from existing movements, paradigms, theories, or precedents? * Does this work offer insights into other movements, paradigms, or theories? |

**Variations**

Sometimes, the candidate may have conducted research to inform this creative work. They might have conducted interviews, observed settings, administered surveys, or analyzed documents to guide their choices. In these circumstances, the candidate could include the aims, methods, results, and conclusions of the research in their exegesis. In addition, some of this material could be embedded within the creative work. For example, a film could include quotes from interviews or statistics from surveys.

Occasionally, the creative work is a collaboration with other creators. In this instance, the exegesis might need to be especially comprehensive to compensate.

**What are the qualities of an excellent thesis by creative works?**

In the following table, the first column stipulates the criteria that examiners utilize to evaluate theses—in particular, theses that do not include creative works. The second column stipulates the criteria that examiners utilize to evaluate theses by creative works. As this table shows, the two sets of criteria match, even though a thesis by creative works diverges markedly from other theses.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Criteria used to evaluate theses without creative works | Criteria used to evaluate theses by creative works |
| A distinct contribution to knowledge or research | A distinct contribution to knowledge, research, practices, or cognitions—such as assumptions, attitudes, and values |
| Evidence of originality—manifested as either new discoveries or new, critical perspectives | Evidence of originality—manifested as a deviation from precedents |
| Satisfactory literary presentation | Satisfactory literary presentation in the exegesis |
| Suitable for publication in scholarly outlets | Suitable for exhibition, performance, or demonstration to relevant audiences |

Furthermore, the scope or lengths of this creative work and exegeses should be appropriate. The following table presents some guidelines on this scope or length for PhDs. For Masters by Research, the scope or length should be about half these guidelines.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Exegesis or creative work | Common scope, duration, or length for PhDs |
| Exegeses | 30 000 to 50 000 words |
| Performances or films | 60 to 90 minutes |
| Literature: novels, plays, and series of poems | Similar to standard works in the genre. |
| Exhibitions | Similar to a standard solo exhibition in the genre |

**Process of examination**

To examine the thesis by creative works, several phases need to be organised. That is

* The examiners receive some instructions about the examination procedure.
* At least one month before the creative work is displayed or demonstrated, the examiners receive the exegeses. This guideline enables the examiner to understand the work before the demonstration or performance.
* The university then organizes the examiners to attend the exhibition, performance, recital, screening, or demonstration. Until the evaluations are submitted, the examiners cannot discuss this work with the candidate, supervisors, or each other.

The instructions that examiners receive will also indicate the weight that candidates want to attach to the creative work and the exegeses. For example

* Candidates will often attached 70% to the creative work and 30% to the exegeses
* However, if the creative work is not as strong as the exegeses, candidates might attach more weight to the exegeses.