

## Towards an Ecology of Practices in Academic Filmmaking

Speaking nearby Ana Vaz, Javiera Cisterna and Sofía Gallisá



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### **Abstract**

This video-essay proposes to depart from the experimental cinema made by Latin American women in order to highlight the tendencies of this *minor cinema* in which we can find ecological and formal concerns that cross our geopolitical and imaginary territories. Thus, we aim to identify an ecology of practices within the work of three contemporary filmmakers that despite their distinct styles and approaches, share commonalities and divergences that offer insight into the rich diversity in the same ecosystem. This was done through a montage of material from three short films: *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (2020) by Ana Vaz, *Erial* (2021) by Javiera Cisterna and *Celaje* (2020) by Sofia Gallisá Muriente. Through this video essay, we aim to interweave ideas, images, and methodologies towards a cohesive understanding of an ecology of practices in both film and academia. Our aspiration is to foster reflection on academic film practice as a possibility to reveal other means for political, epistemological and aesthetic inquiry.

**Keywords:** Ecology of Practices, Common, Experimental Cinema, Academic Filmmaking, Speaking Nearby

Cinema, like a bonfire, illuminates our faces in a dark room. We gather to understand past images of an eternal present and extend them into the future: it is time in spiral. Through the films *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (2020) by Ana Vaz, *Erial* (2021) by Javiera

Cisterna and *Celaje* (2020) by Sofía Gallisá Muriente, we attempt to gather around the torch and illuminate our bodies. These filmmakers question the cinematographic device and give us the possibility of tilling the practices and thus sowing the soil of the image. While Ana Vaz makes her film in a school, Sofia Gallisa makes hers by revisiting her own archive and Javiera Cisterna by approaching a market, the three filmmakers create an artifact of meaning and experimentation born from everyday scenarios. Through the creation of these devices, they share the common goal of thinking and creating other models of image production and linkage. These films have been chosen for the interdisciplinary approaches of their filmmakers and for the range of formal and discursive possibilities they offer. These possibilities become experiences that allow us to glimpse affective, organic and aesthetic connections present in both academic and artistic fields. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that these three filmmakers, in addition to the creation of cinematographic works that have been presented at several festivals around the world, also undertake significant intellectual work—both academic and curatorial—which helps to question and undo the border that usually appears between the academy and artistic practices.

In the 1980s, Trinh T. Minh-ha introduced a concept that not only challenged traditional anthropology and ethnography but also revolutionized contemporary ethnographic filmmaking, “speaking nearby instead of speaking about”:

a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition — these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language. (Minh-ha 1992, 87)

Speaking *nearby* instead of speaking *about* seems to be the possibility of relationship and a shared dialogue, which has its starting point in difference and builds a path and a network. Many filmmakers have raised questions related to audiovisual methodolo-

gies, confronting their practice by questioning what they share with what they film. In this context we would like to approach the ecology of practices mentioned by Isabelle Stengers, where practices are thought of as a way of producing and being in the world. To aim at an ecology of practices is to allow the valorization of different practices as creators of worlds and therefore of living and active epistemes that share the same ecosystem, something that we must defend. It is necessary then to resist the homogenization and de-struction of practices and allow ourselves to navigate, appreciate and learn from this plurality, “to think of practices as an attempt to situate ourselves, starting from the way in which practices were destroyed, poisoned, emboldened in our own history” (Stengers 2011, 27).

Colonial power and coloniality, still present, have often suppressed or made invisible other narratives, aesthetics and identities. This has reinforced the homogenization of practices but also of the gaze, generating stereotyped and impoverished models about otherness. Therefore, the need to reflect on cinematic practices and forms of rapprochement is urgent and necessary if we want to envision practices that are kinder, more available and that distance themselves from the colonial apparatus of domination and the colonial representation of otherness.

The colonial regime has hammered is channels into place and the risk of not maintaining them would be catastrophic. Perhaps everything needs to be started over again: The type of exports needs to be changed, not just their destination; the soil needs researching as well as the subsoil, the rivers and why not the sun. (Fanon 2004, 56-57)

The importance of recognizing that coloniality has unravelled plural modes of relationship emerges in the search to generate less extractivist and more porous relationships. Allowing oneself to think with or near generates spaces of thought and forms that do not impose themselves but rather encourage a shared coexistence. Thinking with, becoming with, walking with, filming with. Approaching, listening, learning. If Fanon proposes questioning the soil, subsoil, rivers, and the sun, these filmmakers propose following this path but also suggest making films *with* the soil, subsoil, rivers, and sun.

They envision a cinema in constant symbiosis with the environment, recalling Pip Chodorov's declaration:

We are not in an economy but an ecology, a grassroots network, filmmakers helping each other, outside of the capitalist system. Furthermore, we don't work with "images," but with organic, physical material that comes from the earth: salts, silvers, minerals. (Chodorov 2014, 36)

We grasp, through the opacity of these three short films by Ana Vaz, Sofia Gallisá Muriente and Javiera Cisterna, that the questions, crossroads and uncertainties emerging in our artistic and academic endeavors are only possible through shared practices. "Seeing" becomes a collective endeavor, a convergence of bodies, perceptions, and ideas, crafting a space fertile for imagination. We recognise that the production of knowledge functions as an institution, legitimizing specific bodies and modes of learning. However, employing decentred audiovisual methodologies, we contend that infiltrating power structures is not only viable but imperative. The academy, conceived as a scenario of inquiry, facilitates the emergence of vantage points where knowledge becomes accessible for dialogue and the awakening and recognition of other epistemes.

Although, at the moment of observing and analyzing these audiovisual pieces we find that the relationship with the filmed environment is dialogic, we consider it important to emphasize that each point of contact implies a point of divergence. Ana Vaz's film emerges from a collaborative effort within an educational environment, fostering collective imagination and dreaming. Conversely, Sofia Gallisá Muriente's work explores historical nuances, environmental crises, and the remnants of progress through personal archives. Finally, Javiera Cisterna's film portrays a dynamic urban landscape in which seemingly abandoned things thrive amidst the circulation of passersby, "as if the sacred emerged from the quotidian" (Delgado, 2011). These filmmakers contribute to a diverse cinematic field, challenging the notion of a singular truth in discourse, knowledge, and artistic practices. In this context, various forms of expression and knowledge intersect, fostering a rich ecosystem of creativity and exchange.

Contemplating the intersection of cinema and academia unveils the potential for both reinforcing and subverting traditional structures and formats. The academy, as a powerful institution, has historically upheld individualistic and coercive narratives. Similarly, cinema, as a tool of power, can perpetuate hierarchical systems of organization. However, amidst these dynamics, we witness a rupture—a fissure through which the light of creativity, rebellion, and the lum(p)en class enters. This luminous proletariat destabilizes established discourses, crafting alternative narratives that, like all living organisms, are both biodegradable and regenerative. The methodologies employed in these films exemplify an ecology of practices: a vibrant assembly of living entities manifesting through light.

In this order of ideas, cinema becomes a relational tool that fluctuates between the one who films and the one who is filmed. It embodies a living practice, constantly evolving and transforming. As a living practice, cinema is in constant movement and transformation, and the work of these three filmmakers brings us closer to an artistic practice that erodes the academic tradition of audiovisual perception. As a living school, cinema is a pedagogy of the imagination, a spiralling animist narrative.

Cinema, intertwined with living organisms, disrupts the conventional process of creation, enlivening and influencing the individuals involved in its making. A sense of shared experience permeates these works, softening rigid artistic or academic boundaries and encouraging mutual learning. Through dialogues, within a shared space, we exercise “the plural and performative right to appear” (Butler 2017, 18), a collective right to expression and visibility. The practice of academic audiovisual creation has the possibility of generating a *third language*, a middle ground or perhaps a blind spot between word, image and thought. This means that an ecology of practices is possible in the academy and will allow the decentralization of formats, thought, form and word. A critical prism on the production of knowledge. Intertwining academic and creative territory by finding their points of contact and divergence can allow us to understand cinema as a changing organism, as a device that allows us to return our attention and interest to what surrounds us: animals, plants, stones, and so on.

That which is shared, then, is also born as a possibility of incorporating availability to the gaze and materializing it through

practices. A practice that becomes collective and makes possible a shared space: a film. A reincorporation in which we understand that cinema is an affectionate and affectable body. It moves and bleeds. It is almost one of our limbs, or one of those others with whom we work, think and walk. Cinema as a set of living relations has a territory that engenders and nourishes it. The material roots of film are a vast animated landscape. Plants. Animals. The multiplicity of the links that we can establish with our environments through audiovisual work engenders and allows for an ecology of practices, pedagogies and cinemas. It is therefore important to think about the practices we want to establish, destabilize or modify. How do these forms of expression coexist with non-human others? It is about challenging the narratives that keep the knowledge of more than human others in immobility and intellectual shadow, through decentered and ecocritical methodologies, allowing cinema to be a melting pot of affections in which the work is the trace of an even more complex process.

The embodied aspect of our endeavors as audiovisual creators and academics stimulates rebellious imaginaries that constantly blur their own borders. That which is shared as a mutable, overflowing and, paradoxically, indefinable zone. These three filmmakers open a network of relationships of a cinema that is in the middle of a territory, a space between different domains and categories, generating points of contact and convergence in their audiovisual practices. This middle territory is a zone of exploration, experimentation, and hybridity where diverse elements are allowed to exist.

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- Vaz, Ana, dir. 2020. *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. 16mm, Brasil/Portugal, 31 min.