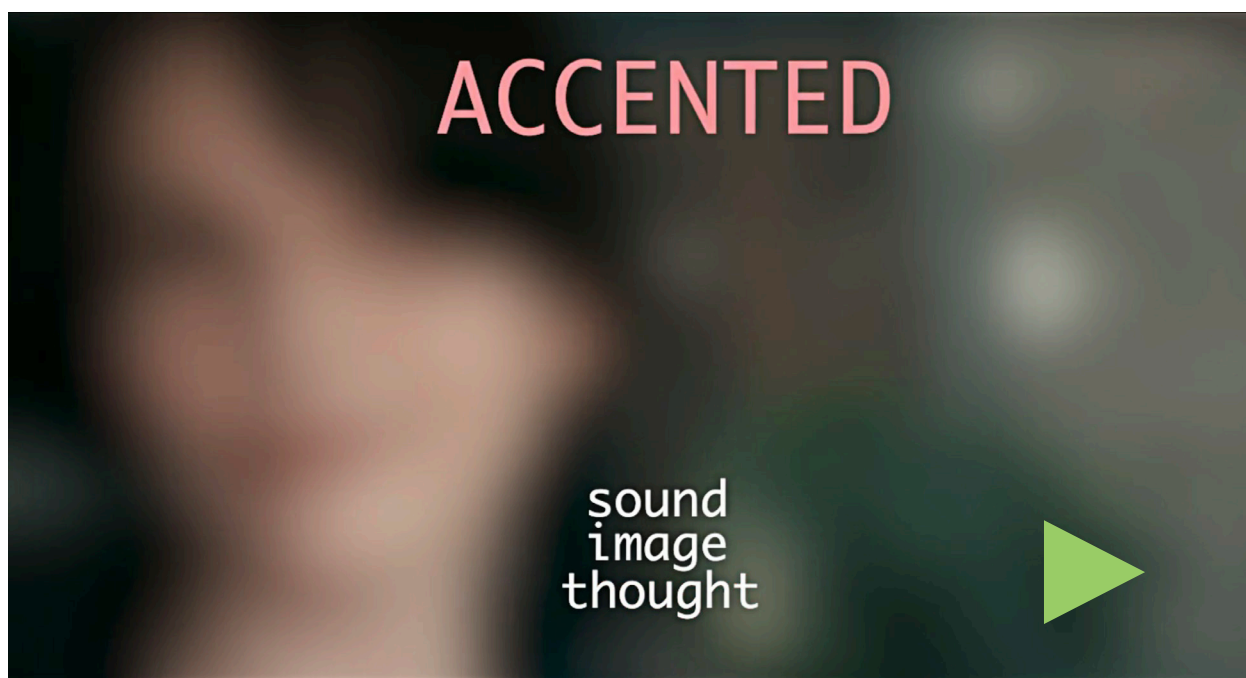


An accented video way of thinking

Becoming videoessay



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Abstract

“An accented video way of thinking: *Becoming* videoessay” explores the videoessay as a conceivably “accented” form. (I prefer the spelling “videoessay” —a sort of accented choice, given that it echoes the Spanish “videoensayo”— to better convey a sense of seamless integration between video and essay.) In *Thinking with an Accent*, Pooja Rangan et al. (2023) argue that the accent should be understood not as a way of speaking but as a mode of thought. Two decades earlier, in *Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy used the term “accented” to describe a mode of film production that shapes filmmakers’ “feelings as thought” into an alternative “accented style” (2001, 26). Expanding on these ideas, I propose to consider the position of the videoessay in relation to traditional (i.e. accentless) scholarship, its imperfect mode of production, and the affective engagement of the “cinephiliac” videoessayist with the media object (Keathley 2000, Grant 2014, 2016). By foregrounding the accented nature of the videoessay form, I suggest that the videoessay represents not only a “video way of thinking”, as Spatz (2018) has indicated, but an *accented* video way of thinking. In Deleuzian terms, I propose that the videoessay, as an accented practice and epistemology, uses the transforming force of “becoming” (*devenir*) (1994a, 1994b) to redefine the boundaries and the discourses of the supposedly “accentless” film and media scholarship, thus “deteritorializing” it to make it accented. Through three different segments, not meant to be watched in any specific order, I explore the accented dimensions of the videoessay’s sound (the echo, the stutter, the index of unbelonging, the simulacrum), surface (the haptic shudder, the textural affect-driven style), and thought (the becoming minoritarian, the shifting of the maker) toward a counter-hegemonic onto-epistemology of videographic criticism.

Keywords: accent, affect, becoming, surface, Deleuze

Statement

What is the creative force and the affective effect of an accent? What does an accent *do* to a videoessay? Can “accented thinking” contribute to the field of videographic criticism? In what ways is the videoessay itself an accented practice and epistemology? Or,

to put it in Deleuzian terms, how does the videoessay, as an accented practice and epistemology, use the transforming force of “becoming” (*devenir*) (1994a, 1994b) to redefine the boundaries and the discourses of “accentless” film and media scholarship, thus “deterritorializing” it to make it accented? And finally, how does the accent transform film and media scholars into videoessayists?

Drawing from a diverse range of theoretical frameworks, and from some of my most profound influences—accent studies, and sociolinguistics, Hamid Naficy’s articulation of accented cinema (2001), Catherine Grant’s conceptualization of material thinking (2014), Alan O’Leary’s development of a nebular epistemic for a cyborg scholarship (2023), Giuliana Bruno’s new materialism (2014), Rosi Braidotti’s posthumanism (1993, 2014a, 2014b), and Gilles Deleuze’s ideas about simulacra and becoming (1994b)—I propose that videographic criticism is the product and the expression of a new epistemology. Please note I prefer the still-unusual spelling “videoessay” to better convey a sense of seamless integration between video and essay. It is an accented choice, influenced by the term «videoensayo» in Spanish, the language I feel most at ease with.

Thinking with an Accent, a recent volume co-edited by Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Pavitra Sundar (2023), maintains that the accent must not be understood as a way of speaking, but as a mode of thought: “Accent does more than denote; it calls out modes of relation, of speaking and listening, laying bare the very logics of representation, identity, and interpretation” (3). Two decades earlier, Hamid Naficy used the term “accented” to define a type of film production that—emerging from displacement and affect—shaped filmmakers’ “feelings as thought” into an alternative “accented style” (2001, 26). Expanding on these ideas, and building on my previous work on the accented voice-over and the empowerment of the accent in videographic criticism (Zecchi 2019, 2022, 2023), through this contribution I go a step ahead: I argue (or should I say, “I feel”?) that the videoessay is conceivably an “accented” form. By considering the position of the videoessay in relation to traditional (i.e., ostensibly accentless) scholarship, its imperfect mode of production, and the affective engagement of the “cinephiliac” videoessayist with the media object (Keathley 2000, Grant 2014, 2016), I maintain that the videoessay can be viewed not

only as a “video way of thinking”, as Ben Spatz (2018) has proposed, but a “video way of thinking with an accent” or, even, an *accented video way of feeling as thinking*.

Can all videoessays be considered accented? As I have already indicated in another work by paraphrasing George Orwell (Zecchi 2023), everybody is accented, but some are more accented than others. Issues of race, class, gender, age, and geographical origin intersect with the way accents are perceived and whether they suffer discrimination, since the accent as a sign of otherness resides in the expectations of the listener. Following this same argument, I would like to propose that all videoessays are accented, but their accent is not always or not uniformly perceived. Even if there are numerous instances of written scholarship that can be considered accented for their poetic and deformative style, while there are several canonical thesis-driven, and argumentative videoessays that could be seen as accentless, I contend that the accented nature of a videoessay is neither stylistic nor discursive—but rather epistemological and affective. As a product of material thinking, even if it is articulated in an authoritative and traditional way, a videoessay is always, to some degree, accented, as it challenges the hegemonic “iconophobic”—as Robert Stam has called it—text-based knowledge (2000, 58) through an accented mode of perception “understood as a practice that is multimodal, multisensorial, and thoroughly mediated” (Rangan et al. 2023, 11).

In order to speak from the accent and not just about it, I created a videoessay that uses Abbas Kiarostami’s *Copie conforme* (*Certified Copy*, 2010) as an instrument to explore three sides of the accent as a creative force of transformation. The film lends itself well to this exercise due to its emphasis on multilingualism, its nonlinear narrative, its repetitions, as well as its exploration of tensions between authenticity and imitation, and the shifting of characters between various roles and personas—their “becoming-other”. Through a non-linear, non-hierarchical, rhizomatic—accented—reasoning, the three central sections of my videoessay, or “chapters” (a term I use provocatively), can be watched in any order. While the chapters are interchangeable, parallel, and complementary, the linear and somewhat authoritative introduction and the deformative and suggestive conclusion that bookend the three sections point instead to

an evolution intended to represent the development of the field (or maybe, more simply, my personal journey as a videoessayist).

As sonic materiality, the accent is not a disruption to speech or hearing, but an echo of an elsewhere and of an *elsewhom*, that, paradoxically, displaces and “deterritorializes” the center, the non-accented. In line with Anita Starosta’s assertion that “the accent exists only in its difference” (2023, 96), I propose embracing the accented difference in order to make a “minor use of a major language,” as Deleuze puts it in a different context (1994, 107). This process “carves out a non-preexistent foreign language within a major language, and makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur. [...] It does not affect preexisting words, but itself introduces the words it affects” (1994, 110). In this sense, the accent is not an attempt at imitating an accentless norm. It is not a copy (a term carrying connotations of inferiority) of an “original” accentless sound; it is not mere mimesis, a repetition without difference, but a repetition with difference, a repetition towards a discrete new original—a simulacrum. The accented utterance—the simulacrum—deterritorializes, and overturns, the norm, the accentless, the “original” original. Likewise, the videoessay makes a minor use of the major language of film and media scholarship: it uses a well-established discourse in a counterhegemonic (accented) way. The videoessay is not a reproduction—a translation into images—of a text-based (also hierarchically superior) academic argument, but rather a self-contained, independent, autonomous artifact—essentially, a form which is its own simulacrum. Thus, in Chapter 1, the “accentless” English male voice becomes female, then Italian accented, and then it dissolves into an echo, a stutter, and finally into an image.

This leads me to my second point, namely the accent as an image, a palpable materiality, a surface with depth. As Catherine Grant has eloquently expounded, the relationship between creativity and criticality produces a sort of cinephiliac “shudder” that gives rise to new affective knowledge. In Chapter 2, the accent is not acoustic, but a visual and tangible style, a textural materiality that resides on the surface of language, on its skin. The accent is felt epidermally, like a shudder, exemplifying how Frantz Fanon’s concept of the “epidermization” (1952) of racism extends to the accent as marker of difference and target for discrimination.

In videographic criticism, criticality and creativity interweave on the surface. While Western thought tends to dismiss surfaces as superficial, as noted by Giuliana Bruno (2014), in the videoessay, the accented surface has depth, enabling the creator to transcend traditional boundaries, by breaking the fourth wall to engage affectively with the media object. For Bruno, “aesthetic encounters are ‘mediated’ on the surface” (2014, 3-5). In this light, as seen for the accented sound, the accented image becomes a new artifact—a simulacrum, an “image without resemblance” in Deleuze and Guattari’s words (1994, 170).

Third, the makers. For Hamid Naficy, the “accent” within what he defines as “accented cinema” doesn’t primarily stem from the filmmakers’ speech but rather from their displacement and their artisanal production methods. This displacement makes them susceptible to the tensions of marginality and difference (2000, 10). Yet videoessayists’ displacement—their shift from being accentless to becoming accented—is neither a geographical movement, a diaspora, nor a linguistic reterritorialization, but an epistemological transition. Videoessayists are “shifters”, a term that in sociolinguistics indicates people who replace one language by another, generally as a result of migration (Grenoble 2021). However, while “shifters” had to displace their minoritized language for the language of the majority, and usually politically dominant, group, videoessayists replace a majority language—and way of thinking—with a minority one.

Furthermore, by bridging sociolinguistic perspectives on both verbal and non-verbal accents with Gilles Deleuze’s theory of language and “becoming” (1994), in particular in relation to Deleuze’s concept of the creative work as “affect in becoming”, I would like to venture that the transition of film and media scholars to the videoessay represents not just an epistemological shift but also an ontological transformation.

The different degrees of engagement of the videoessayists with their media object (through embodied and affective connections, through disembodied and mechanical interventions, or through no interaction at all) can be understood in a broad sense as manifestations of “becoming” in Deleuzian terms. Videoessayists actively partake in a transformative process that involves what Deleuze defines “becoming-minoritarian,” and “becoming-other-

ness”: that is, “becoming-accented”. In this context, I propose that the notion of “accent” symbolizes both the *potentia*, a creative force for variation and transformation, and *actus*, the actualization of difference as positivity.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the accent as a response to a particular material experience that structure our feelings as thoughts. The mind is not abstract and disembodied, but situated and embodied, as Brian Massumi (1995) has notably argued. The *auctor* becomes *agens*, emerging from their self-inscription into the media object, either visible as an embodied presence, or invisible as the narrator of a disembodied voiceover, as the writer of a text overlaid on the images, or, as O’Leary would probably put it, as a curator of a nebular epistemic. For Deleuze, affect produces “becomings”: “Both the artist and observer *become with* the artwork. [...] In the process, the body of sensation becomes a new, unique affect” (1994b, 173-174). This process involves extracting the element from the original media object and instigating new functions, thus merging the videoessayist with the very fabric of the videoessay itself: the videoessayist “becomes” videoessay.

Finally, it is worth asking whether the videoessay will lose its accent as videographic criticism solidifies its place as a recognized academic field. Personally, I don’t think it will. On the contrary, I believe that greater academic recognition will allow more freedom for the videoessay to fully embrace its accent, and, ultimately, for the videoessayist to become videoessay.

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