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Academic Filmmaking in the New Humanities

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Academic Filmmaking in the New Humanities

Articles. Introduction to the special issue

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Alan O'Leary *is Associate Professor of Film and Media at Aarhus University. He has published video essays in venues like* [in]Transition *and among his books is a study of the 1966 film classic,* The Battle of Algiers *(Mimesis, 2019). His* 'Manifesto for a parametric videographic criticism' *appeared in* NECSUS *in 2021.*

Abstract

The article provides an introduction to the first of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking, which, apart from this introduction, contains eleven prose articles. The article describes the variety of filmmaking practice in the academy, and some of the venues where examples of the practice are published or exhibited. It gestures at the multiple origins of academic filmmaking with special reference to the tradition of the essay film, and finds a key re-

flexive moment in Eric S. Faden's (prose) "Manifesto for Critical Media" (2008), which articulated the challenge of using "image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm" to create scholarly audiovisual work. The introduction goes on to set out the aims for the special issues, and to describe the contents of the eleven articles in the first issue and some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents. The eleven articles deal with themes raging from academic filmmaking as activism, to vulnerability and embodiment, to the challenges of production and publishing, and of institutional legitimization.

Keywords: Video essays, digital humanities, experimental scholarship, videographic criticism, practice research

This is the first of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking in the New Humanities, understood as a conglomeration of hybrid practices — such as digital humanities, environmental humanities, medical humanities, posthumanities, and public humanities — that reach across the arts to the social and natural sciences even as they incorporate and extend traditional humanities concerns and methods. With these two special issues, we have wished to evidence and interrogate the possibilities of filmmaking as research method, medium of scholarly communication and also as a distinct mode of thinking for this conglomeration of hybrid practices. This first issue contains eleven prose articles, while the second contains ten video essays accompanied by guiding texts. The first part of the short introduction is nearly identical in both special issues, but the latter part sets out the individual contents of each issue and indicates some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents.

Because of the diversity of its practices and origins, any definition of academic filmmaking can only be a tautology: academic filmmaking simply refers to film or video made by academics or filmmaking practices undertaken by them. Some of the range of academic filmmaking can be examined in venues including *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy, Screenworks*, the journal of screen media practice research, *Journal of Anthropological Films, Journal of Embodied Research* (JER), the "Beyond The Text" strand of *Sociological Research Online*, and *[in]Transition*, a journal of videographic film and moving image

studies. (Both *JER* and *[in]Transition* are discussed by their editors in the first of these special issues, while the editors of *Sightlines* are also represented.) Academic film and video are also increasingly shown at conferences and festivals, and in museums, institutions which themselves draw on academic labour and expertise in the creation and curation of audiovisual works.

Filmmaking in the academy sometimes takes the form of practice (or practice-led / practice-based) research or creative (or creative-critical) research, in which, in order to generate knowledge, the filmmaking observes protocols from the arts rather than from traditional scholarship, even if such work is often accompanied by explication in more conventional prose forms (Nelson 2022, Lulkowska 2024). This is the case for much of the influential practice of special issue co-editor Catherine Grant, whose body of work includes contemplative digital videos like *Dissolves of Passion: A Film within a Film* (2014), a piece she locates in relation to both video art and scholarly concerns in a subsequent prose article (Grant 2019). But academic filmmaking takes place in a variety of modes: from documentary record and essay filmmaking to fictional storytelling, from participatory filmmaking to experiments (like Grant's *Dissolves of Passion*) in found footage curation and remix, from illustrated lecture to artistic experiment. Perhaps the best-known example of research filmmaking born in the academy is Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), which uses a mix of straightforward documentary and imaginative reenactment to record and denounce the legacy of the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide. Forensic Architecture, a "research agency" based at Goldsmiths, University of London, likewise employ film as one of their techniques to investigate human rights violations, and to present their findings. The Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab uses film to access dimensions of the world that resist description in words, for example in the well-received *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012), while anthropologist Christian Suhr uses a combination of prose and film in his *Descending With Angels: Islamic Exorcism and Psychiatry* (2019), described as a "film monograph", to speak nearby — to use Trinh T. Minh-ha's resonant phrase (Chen 1992)— the invisible phenomena of jinn possession and psychosis among Muslims living in Denmark. Artist filmmaker and academic Joanna Callaghan uses a mix of fictional and documentary modes in films including the 80-minute *Love in the*

Post (2014), inspired by Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, to explore ethical questions and women's experience.

It is worth noting that filmmaking in the academy has a history that long predates the digital period, stretching back through, for example, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's influential "theory film" *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). Mulvey herself has gone on to interrogate the affordances of the digital in a monograph, *Death 24x a Second* (2006) and short experimental videos like her remix of a scene from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Mulvey 2014), that have been particularly influential on the new field of videographic criticism, referring to the audiovisual analysis of audiovisual and screen media. Working separately and sometimes together, Kevin B. Lee (contributor to the first of these two special issues) and Chloé Galibert-Laîné have developed the desktop documentary format (the recording of the computer screen) to critique the industries of spectacle and capture the complexities of online life in compelling films like Lee's "Transformers: the Premake" (2014) and Galibert-Laîné's "Watching the Pain of Others" (2019). Videographic critic Ian Garwood uses the desktop format reflexively to interrogate "The place of voiceover in academic audiovisual film and television criticism" (2016) and is developing an audiovisual research project to the equivalent of book length (see Garwood 2020). The first such "videographic book" was published in spring 2024 in a series edited by Jason Mittell and published online by Lever Press. This is Mittell's own *The Chemistry of Character in "Breaking Bad"*, a collection of more than twenty videos ranging in length from a few minutes to a couple of hours, hosted on the digital platform Fulcrum and interspersed with prose reflections (Mittell 2024).

As this brief survey may suggest, the practices and so the origins of academic filmmaking are multiple: these origins include feature film and experimental cinema, news reportage and photojournalism, artist film and video, ethnographic film and documentary film in all of the modes identified by Bill Nichols (poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative; see Nichols 2017), as well as film pedagogy (Pantenburg 2024). Key to the increasing presence of filmmaking in the academy and to the emergence of fields like videographic criticism has been the consumerization of digital technology and the relative affordability of film and computing hardware and editing software. In his "Manifesto

for Critical Media" published in 2008, film and media studies scholar Eric S. Faden located the practice of academic video essay-making in the tradition of the essay film reaching back to the Soviet filmmakers of the 1930s, and in a historical context of electronic—more recently, digital—culture that has superseded the alphabetic. Faden writes that academic video essay-making "does not replace traditional scholarship"; rather, "[t]his is a *new* practice beyond traditional scholarship." To use terminology that Faden himself does not use, the video essay assumes *literacy* but is founded upon and cultivates *audiovisualcy*. Moreover, video essay-making implies "a shift in rhetorical mode":

> The traditional essay is argumentative—thesis, evidence, conclusion. Traditional scholarship aspires to exhaustion, to be the definitive, end-all-be-all, last word on a particular subject. The media stylo [Faden's term for scholarly video essays], by contrast, suggests possibilities—it is not the end of scholarly inquiry; it is the beginning. It explores and experiments and is designed just as much to inspire as to convince. (Faden 2008)

Many scholars have since taken up Faden's challenge of considering "image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm" in order to create scholarly audiovisual work, and (as set out below) it's fair to say that the audiovisual works in the second of this pair of special issues confirm the exploratory and experimental character of the scholarly video essay that Faden identifies.

Along with the adoption of the audiovisual, there has emerged a lively and ongoing debate, amongst practitioners of videographic criticism especially, about the appropriate form that the digital video essay should take for the purposes of scholarship. This debate has taken place in dedicated books (van den Berg and Kiss 2016; Grizzaffi 2017; Keathley, Mittell and Grant 2019) and in journal special issues like *The Cine-Files* 15 (Cox-Stanton and de Fren 2020), which asks the question "what constitutes videographic scholarship?". Beyond that, there is a scattered but substantial corpus of special sections or journal articles (and videos) that theorise videographic criticism or reflect on scholars' own videographic practice in terms relevant for other scholars (see for example Keathley 2011; Grant

2014 and 2019; Mittell 2019 and 2021; Binotto 2020; Garwood 2020; Kiss 2021, 2024; O'Leary 2021; Bird 2023; Sekar 2024). Supplementing these reflections are the interviews conducted by Will DiGravio and his collaborator Emily Su Bin Ko on the *Video Essay Podcast*, inaugurated in 2019 with an interview with co-editor Catherine Grant.

The present pair of special issues reprises the task of evidencing and debating the possibilities of the video essay for scholarly practice. The editors' primary aim has been to bring together practitioners and scholars of filmmaking research, academic film and videographic criticism from across a range of disciplines to consider the affordances and challenges of filmmaking as means and medium of investigation and communication. But the special issues, and the second of the two especially, are also intended to debate and to demonstrate *how* the video essay can work as a scholarly form. The contributors adopt a variety of approaches to articulating their scholarly aims in the audiovisual form of a video essay. As the *Academic Quarter* submissions guide puts it: "Video essays should be original works of publishable quality in a rigorous scholarly context, and may take argumentative, expository, explanatory, documentary, performative, essayistic, poetic, symbolic (metaphorical) or artistic forms, or a combination of these." Most of the video essays published here do indeed offer a combination of these approaches. However, the reader/viewer is asked to notice how communication is performed most often not through explicit argumentation, but through affect, dialogic procedures, evocation and juxtaposition, questioning rather than answering, and even through irony. As Faden suggested in his 2008 manifesto, the video essay "moves scholarship beyond just creating knowledge and takes on an aesthetic, poetic function". The co-editors would argue that the videos in the second of our special issues suggest that this poetic function is essential to the knowledge function.

Note, however, that the videos in the second special issue do not appear alone. Building on established practice in journals like *[in]Transition*, each video is accompanied by a creator statement or "guiding text", designed to articulate "the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form". The provision of a supporting statement is modelled after standard procedure for the articulation

of research questions and methods in university-based practice-research projects, as set out for example in the style guide of the UK-based *Screenworks* journal, founded in 2007, and described in the contribution to these special issues by Kerrigan, Frankham and Verdon. We acknowledge a key difference between our special issues and these journals: both *[in]Transition* and *Screenworks* publish the peer reviews along with each video (*[in]Transition* even provides the names of reviewers); in this context, the "act of scholarship" emerges in the encounter and intersection between the video and several prose texts (and multiple authors). We do not provide the peer reviews here, though we are extremely grateful to the very many reviewers who have generously lent their time and expertise to the preparation of these special issues: the positive stamp of their labour is all over the submissions and the project as a whole. However, we will point out that there is no assumption here that the video essays are to be considered as "autonomous objects". It might go without saying that no scholarly output is an autonomous object; but it should be more apparent than usual that the content of the scholarship is to be grasped in a dialogue—in this case, a dialogue of video and accompanying prose text, as well as the existing body of creative and scholarly practice with which each submission engages.

As mentioned above, the co-editors have worked with the understanding that filmmaking can be used by scholars as a *means* to investigate a particular theme, phenomenon or object, or as a *medium* to report or publicise research results, or it can be understood as a *mode of thought* in itself (what some describe, drawing on Spatz (2018), as the "video way of thinking"). In the call for submissions, we asked potential contributors to respond to one or more of the following questions:

- What are the political, epistemic, and aesthetic advantages of filmmaking in the academic context, and what are its potentials?
- What place is there for experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic practice?
- What is the relationship and relative importance of process and product in academic filmmaking practice?
- What methods are used in academic filmmaking across the different disciplines? What do these have in common and how do they differ?

- What are the institutional opportunities for and impediments to the adoption and development of filmmaking in the academy?
- What are the challenges and possibilities for the publication or exhibition of academic filmmaking?

All of these questions have come to be addressed in one or more prose or video contributions across the two issues. In the next section, we summarise the individual contents of each issue and indicate some of the themes or approaches shared among those contents.

The articles

Addressing our call to consider the political advantages of filmmaking practices in the academy, Eylem Atakav considers her filmmaking as a form of activism as well as a research process in "The impact of documentary filmmaking: academics as agents of social and political change". Using the examples of three films she has made on forms of gendered violence, *Growing Up Married* (2016), *Lifeline* (2020), and *Left Behind* (2023), Atakav argues that academic documentary offers a powerful means ways to share and activate knowledge, and to target change in cultural politics and policy. For Atakav, the cultivation of impact can go beyond mere institutional and funding necessity (it is an audited requirement of the UK academy where the author is based), to become a force for social justice.

In "Documentary and the question of knowledge", Lizzie Thynne considers *Armotonta menoa – Hoivatyön laulujaan* (*Ruthless Times: Songs of Care*), a Finnish work made as part of a research project at the University of Aalto Critical Cinema Lab by director and academic Susanna Helke. Thynne utilises Jacques Rancière's critique of political art and his idea of the distribution of the sensible to posit that Helke's musical documentary about the privatization of elderly care in Finland constitutes a progressive model of testimonial practice. This is in part because the film/researcher team in this production resists "giving voice" to its participants; instead, in "orchestrating" their voices (literally setting them to music in choral sequences), the film aligns itself with the existing perspectives and activism of carers and nurses. In highlighting the political context of its contributors in these ways, Helke's research film makes an important contribution to feminist documentary practice and to the generation of academic knowledge.

Several contributions address our question about the place of experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic practice. First, Jenny Oyallon-Koloski's article, "Thinking diegetically", turns to the scholarly field of videographic criticism. She explores the work of four practitioners (herself, Catherine Grant, Dayna McLeod and Liz Greene) whose videographic studies (and their aesthetics) engage with the constraints of their source materials' "diegetic tethers" to (re)construct a story world in meaningful and productive ways. In his essay "Unsettling bodies. Video essay as embodied research," Johannes Binotto combines an interest in aesthetic and political aspects in his exploration of the potential contribution of videographic research to a more vulnerable, non-normative academia of the future. He understands videographic research fundamentally as an embodied practice and posits the video essay itself as a body "mingled" with the body of the researcher.

In "On Academic Filmmaking as a 'Messy' Methodology", Pinar Fontini asks how the demands of the academy "get along with" the unpredictability of artistic practice. Using the case of her own PhD filmmaking, she describes how conditions in Istanbul during the Covid pandemic challenged the making of her work on contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey (which eventually became the film *Dream Workers* (2022)). Fontini describes how the necessarily "messy" processes she happily adopted might pose a challenge to academic norms and traditions.

Three "professor-artist-researchers", Andrés Dávila, Carlos Terán Vargas and special issue co-editor Libertad Gills, argue their case for experimental filmmaking as research on the basis of their work in the Universidad de las Artes, Ecuador. They explore their individual experiences of making the experimental ethnographic documentary short *Sour Lake* (Dávila, 2019), the found footage essay film *1922* (Gills, 2023), and the "imagework design" *Dispositivo ORG* (Terán Vargas, 2017-2024). Through the films' different formal approaches, they manage, the co-authors argue, to establish a significant and promising dialogue with teaching practices and research within the academy and also beyond.

In "Making Space for Film with Film Geographies", Jessica Jacobs approaches the question of institutional opportunities for and impediments to filmmaking in the academy from the perspective of the discipline of geography. Jacobs, founder of the online screening

initiative *Film Geographies*, offers her reflection on the origins of the platform at the margins of her discipline, and argues that the diverse affordances of the Film Geographies platform have generated much needed accessible film space for geographers to make, watch and debate films, enabling its participants to shape and influence a range of film-focused and practice-led contributions to the discipline. In so doing, she offers a model of good practice to colleagues in other disciplines in which academic filmmaking has not yet made significant inroads.

Critical questions of environmental politics and pedagogy are to the fore in Kevin B. Lee and Silvia Cipelletti's "Investigating Ecocinema through the Video Essay". Their detailed case study is the Video Essay for Ecocinema course they taught in the 2023 spring semester at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Arguing that videographic criticism "represents an exemplary mode of contemporary digital literacy that can be applied to a host of subjects", Lee and Cipelletti work with students to use the video essay to analyse how ecocinema can alert us to aspects of the environmental crisis. The authors set out how their course followed an ethos first described in relation to the video essay by influential practitioner Liz Greene, "to teach the student, not the subject, modelling ways for [students] to make their own connections to the topic of ecocinema."

In "A Decade of *[in]Transition*: Reflecting on Past Challenges and Future Possibilities", Kevin L. Ferguson and Drew Morton reprise Jessica Jacob's focus on the challenges and possibilities for the publication and exhibition of academic filmmaking. They write on the experience of co-editing *[in]Transition*, the innovative journal of film and moving image studies, which has been publishing research in videographic form since 2014. Morton, a founding editor, and Ferguson, a later recruit to the editorial collective, reflect on the journal's past challenges in establishing scholarly legitimacy, embedding innovative practices of open peer review, and maintaining an open approach when it came to setting good practice and understanding what constituted knowledge in videographic criticism. They also consider future possibilities for the journal now that it has transferred to a more sustainable platform at the Open Library of Humanities (which also hosts the *Journal of Embodied Research*), and as it confronts videographic modes such as "vidding" (fan music

videos) that push against the traditionally-defined boundaries of the "essayistic."

In their article "A Filmmaking Research Continuum: The articulation of Creative Practice Research," Australia-based academic filmmakers Susan Kerrigan, Bettina Frankham and James Verdon explore a range of international academic filmmaking modes located between audio-visual scholarship and commercial modes of filmmaking. They also explore the common practices and pragmatics, across academic filmmaking research modes, of demonstrating research legitimacy through the composition of the research statement. With particular reference to two peer reviewed online publications (*Screenworks* in the UK and the Australian journal *Sightlines*), they describe how creative practice research journals have been instrumental in helping to mature the discipline into a more rigorous and significant field.

Finally, in "The Textual, the Audiovisual, and Videographic Thought," Ben Spatz speaks from their experience as founding editor of the videographic *Journal of Embodied Research,* to examine shifting relationships in academic filmmaking and creative practice among the textual, the audiovisual, and the videographic, terms which Spatz considers important to distinguish. Drawing on their own artistic research practice and critical theories of embodiment and identity, and recalling Johannes Binotto's contribution to this special issue, Spatz argues that it is incumbent upon scholarly filmmakers of all kinds to critically re-examine the ways in which video and audiovisual media more generally remain entangled with bodies, places, and the "still-powerful technology of the written word."

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The impact of documentary filmmaking

Academics as agents of social and political change

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Abstract

In this article, I draw on three documentaries I have made (*Growing Up Married* [2016], *Lifeline* [2020], and *Left Behind* [2023]) on different forms of gendered violence. I use these as examples to discuss ways in which films made within academic contexts can inform and influence policy. While doing so I reflect on how I built a network of policy makers and charities and used film as a potentially useful tool for partnership development. I explore how scholars can consider filmmaking as a form of activism while arguing that strategies developed within the frame of creative practice afford us alternative ways of promoting social, cultural and political change. I examine the relationship between academic research and activism and the specific role that filmmaking can play in enhancing/problematising this relationship, and argue that the cultivation of impact (as activism) goes beyond institutional, and funding imperatives.

Keywords: academic activism; policy impact; social and cultural impact; academic filmmaking; gendered violence; public engagement; documentary

In this article I critically reflect on how documentary filmmaking in academia can be an efficient strategy for scholar activism. I argue that academics can act as powerful agents of social and political change, as they visualise research through filmmaking. To do so, I highlight the activist potential of filmmaking within academia while drawing on the three short documentaries I have made. These are: *Growing Up Married* (2016), which focuses on the recollections of four women from Turkey of being forced into marriage as children; *Lifeline* (2020), which reveals the reality of working on the frontline of domestic abuse services in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic; and, most recently, *Left Behind* (2023), which focuses on the implications of the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status for migrant victims of domestic violence in the United Kingdom. While reflecting on these examples I offer answers to the questions of: what are the political advantages of documentary filmmaking in the academic context, and what are its potentials?

There is an existing body of scholarship that examines documentary filmmaking as a method of academic inquiry. Angela Fitzgerald and Magnolia Lowe (2020), for instance, make a case for acknowledging documentary filmmaking not only as a research output but as a research process. Documentaries provide an impetus and platform for change, affirmative action and meaningful dialogue (Bacha 2015 cited in Fitzgerald and Lowe 2020, 1). Documentary filmmaking has been acknowledged as a form of qualitative research and discussed as a way to generate and disseminate knowledge in the academic space (Morgan et al. 2019). My aim in this article is not to examine ways in which my creative practice work advances theories of academic filmmaking as a mode of research. Instead, I approach the term academic filmmaking in the context of using film as a tool to create audio-visual forms of academic research on a range of topics that are not confined to film/filmmaking theory. I explore how academia is a fruitful space that provides opportunities to make films on any area of research. In other words, my focus here is not on research into filmmaking, but rather using filmmaking in communicating academic research outside academia. I do this by reflecting on my documentaries' contribution to scholarly and community understanding of gendered violence. I simultaneously highlight the value of filmmaking by demonstrating its impact on policy, community groups, and public debate.

The body of scholarship on academic filmmaking tends to prioritise critical reflections on the applications and methods around the *making* of films and focus less on the methods employed to create social and political impact through films. This is not to say that every film made within academic context has to have impact, though there is room to argue that post-production, and impact strategies of creative practice research are equally worthy of critical reflection. Scholarship on methodological innovations in and with academic filmmaking tend to focus more on the pre-production and production processes, but less on the process of knowledge transition and dissemination, which is how I approach the term impact throughout this article.

Susan Kerrigan and Joanna Callaghan's article (2018) on the impact of filmmaking research proposes a valuable framework with four pathways to impact using film, video and filmmaking. They aptly argue that filmmaking research impact disseminates new knowledge and understanding about life and society, and is evidenced through the medium, the technology as well as a cultural and creative product affecting change in audiences, through organisations and government policies (ibid.). In this article, I reflect on these pathways while concentrating on the political potential of academic filmmaking. It is for this reason that my aim is not to provide an account on the creative choices and aesthetic qualities of the documentaries I made, although I note the value of doing so, and have written about this in detail elsewhere (Atakav 2020, 2023).

Kerrigan and Callaghan's pathways to impact in filmmaking research include: a) film/video as a technology that advances understandings of particular topics; b) research film used as a vehicle for research dissemination; c) research collaborations for which making a film is a means to filmmaking practice; and d) filmmaker researchers engage with stakeholders and refine their research processes through the making of and dissemination of their film. In the context of the three documentaries I use as examples here, the second and fourth aspects of these pathways, in particular, are most relevant. The fourth pathway proposed here is also applicable to the documentaries I have created, as they are all situated within the Humanities, and they occur as a form of cultural production, where the filmmaking is underpinned by social storytelling of society and

culture. All three documentaries discussed here are made to disseminate research findings to the general public.

My focus in this article, then, is to reflect critically on the ways in which documentary filmmaking can be used in academic work as a method; and, documentary as an audio-visual tool that has the potential to make a significant contribution to social, cultural and political life. Although there is significant emphasis on the process making of documentaries in academia and acknowledging it as a method of qualitative inquiry, I argue that there is still a need to develop a framework and reflection on the implications of filmmaking within academia, and strategies for engagement with non-academic contexts for documentaries produced within academic contexts.

In the context of the United Kingdom, within which I work, academics are encouraged or even required to think of research impact for a project to receive funding. Pressures from institutions to produce research with impact may bring about concerns around the ethics of impact. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) (the national system in the UK for assessing the quality of research at higher education providers), for example, has asserted its ambition to assess the impact of research outside of academia. To this end, impact was defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (UKRI, n.d.). Highly graded impact through peer academic review can mean REF rewards or successful grant acquisition. I argue that academic filmmaking and its impact do not need to be REF related. Indeed, I did not intend to create any of the projects discussed in this article and the strategies for their impact to fit in with an assessment like REF. I would have done the projects in exactly the same way regardless of REF, as I am passionate about and certainly more interested in using the tools afforded by academia in contributing to social, cultural and political change. Filmmaking within a research-informed context can be fraught with ethical challenges. Indeed, the downside of impact (as defined by assessments like REF) has been highlighted for its exploitation of research participants, as well as its short-termism (for instance, see Kelly 2014). There are indeed risks for impact if driven by institutional needs and narratives. These may result in exploitation of participants for short term benefit to demonstrate evidence of impact. In this context, it is crucial to give agency to stakeholders

and build trust with them. It is important to acknowledge that this might create tensions between a final film and participants.

In all three documentaries, my main concern has always been to create an audio-visual platform for women to use to share their experiences. I acknowledge that I take others' images and stories to use them in the service of political and academic projects; however, while doing so, I make it my central concern to consider what social, political and cultural effects come from this kind of work, even if simultaneously questioning at what cost. I see the contributors to the films I make as a agents of change for others. I use filmmaking to mobilise academic research. In doing so, I intend to create a connection between the academic and the non-academic by creating research in a form that others will want to read, watch, or feel and learn from. I see this as the key requirement for impact of any research. In other words, I aim to demonstrate different strategies that shape and maximise the reach and impact of academic films. These include recognition of the potential attractiveness of the work (by the media, policy makers, and the public); the pinpointing of the intended audience; and vigorously promoting any exposure the work receives to gain greater visibility (Mateer and Haillay 2019). All three examples I refer to throughout this article demonstrate how documentary film can play an important role in highlighting, scrutinising, and fighting against gendered violence. I want to show how filmmaking has the potential to enable academics to act as agents of social and political change. This leads to considering my positionality as a scholar-filmmaker-activist. Similar to Ramasubramian and Sousa (2021), I acknowledge that there is a growing number of academics who see activism as an essential part of what drives their passion for their roles as academics, and yet it is 'not everyone's cup of tea'. And I acknowledge that it is important to identify challenges and constraints, and assess ethical values, resources, institutional support, risks, and motivations in adopting an activist approach.

Formulating a research question / identifying an issue in policy

Conducting any academic research starts with identifying a gap in existing knowledge, and formulating a research question addressing that gap. In making documentaries within academia, I hold on

to the same principle. However, my intention of providing visual evidence about social and political gaps in the context of gendered violence leads me to conduct the review of 'literature' outside academia. This could include policy papers, parliamentary white papers, reports by charities and commissioners, etc. The aim here is to identify a gap in governmental policy, for instance, to create audio-visual 'evidence' to address that particular issue.

Growing Up Married, in this context, targeted the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill (which became an Act in the UK in 2022, and seeks to remove parents' right to consent to marriage on behalf of a minor and raises the age of consent to 18). The documentary was used as evidence in discussion of the proposed policy changes because it presented the voices and experiences of child brides. By acting as an audio-visual platform for child brides to share experiences, it contributed to political debates at Westminster in support of parliamentarians and NGOs. *Growing Up Married* shows the potential of academic filmmaking and activist scholarship to forge change and to bring women together across cultural difference. It shows how stories of women in Turkey can be influential in informing the law in the UK around forced and child marriage.

The idea behind *Lifeline* was to rapidly collect stories from the frontline workers of domestic abuse services in England at an historically crucial moment in time, and to capture the 'present' moment. It intentionally coincided with the discussions around the Domestic Abuse Bill (an Act since April 2021), and was submitted as evidence to the Women's Health Strategy Consultation by the UK Government (2021). *Left Behind*, on the other hand, has an overt political agenda to address the Victims and Prisoners Bill discussions. It advocates that that migrant victims and survivors of domestic violence who have 'no recourse to public funds', can be given access to funds, in order to correct a significant shortcoming of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The Act was deemed by experts as discriminatory for this reason, and left migrant women in the most vulnerable of positions. It is important to note here, of course, that, political change takes many years of campaigning, so one cannot assume immediate impact, but rather a 'slow-burning' one. This requires sustained effort in keeping connections with stakeholders over long periods of time, but at the same time, it affords academics

the time to build trust with non-academic partners in ways that would otherwise not be possible. This is true for the impact story of *Growing Up Married*, where the film was produced in 2016 but the Child Marriage Act came to force in 2022 – some six years later, after a period of sustained commitment with stakeholders, and campaigning from pressure groups.

Methods of engagement

Engaging with the public, the media, policymakers, politicians, film festivals, universities, and charities has been at the heart of the success of the three documentaries discussed here. As Mateer and Haillay (2019) explain, in the context of practice-as-research, while time demands on academics and researchers might dissuade them from taking on distribution tasks, if the projects in question are truly going to be of value and generate impact, they are essential. Being able to reach target audiences is important, but to generate maximum impact, academic filmmakers need to secure advocacy as well. For both *Lifeline* and *Left Behind*, engaging and integrating in the films interviews with policymakers have been an influential strategy to secure this advocacy.

Identifying participants and defining their engagement in the documentary from the beginning of the project is an important strategy for the potential of a film's impact. This, of course, requires a process of trust-building, and building sustainable relationships with all participants and stakeholders. This can, at times, be a lengthy process, which might take years to establish. In the case of *Left Behind*, for instance, working with charities including Southall Black Sisters (SBS is led by and for black and minoritized women to provide a specialist service to victims of abuse), Karma Nirvana (is the first specialist charity established in the UK for victims and survivors of honour based abuse), and Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), we had to establish trust by building into the project significant amount of time for meetings before any filmmaking took place. Particularly when the topic is sensitive, charities need to establish a form of trust between researcher-filmmakers and themselves, before considering opening doors to their clients. *Left Behind* foregrounds victim/survivors' stories, and we spent over a year attending events, having frequent meetings, offering our support with weekly workshops for the SBS Support Group to build up the

trust, and convince them that this was an academic impact film project to target a change in policy, rather than journalistic or sensationalist piece that would pose any threat to survivors' safety. Working closely with a range of charities, and involving their views in the film, secured their "buy-in" to use the film in their campaigns related to the issue. This was also true for change and policy makers including MPs and legal professionals. Including their voices in the film meant that they would each become advocates for the film, citing it in political and legal debates, and sharing the film with their networks. This was also relevant to the dissemination strategy for *Lifeline*. It is important to note that despite all efforts, at times, as a result of internal sector politics, and each individual's and charity's priorities, a balancing act of negotiations may need to take place related to questions posed to the creative agency of filmmakers. This might create unforeseen challenges that need to be addressed before the release of a film. For instance, showing *Left Behind* to SBS and LAWRS before its launch resulted in challenging conversations with both charities that demanded changes particularly relating to more screen time for their own charities. We argued that we had a film that argued for change, and that wanted to raise public awareness of an injustice; a film that compelled people to take notice of an issue that has been flying under the radar. We successfully argues that we wanted to make a film that campaigners can use to promote their agenda on NRPF rather than a film that foregrounds particular charities.

For *Left Behind*, one of the activities we ran during the trust-building phase, before we filmed with the women in the Support Group for SBS was to offer a filmmaking workshop in one of their weekly meetings. This gave women the opportunity to learn more about storytelling through film and they created their own short films over the course of the day. This activity afforded us the opportunity to get to know the group better and to share our intentions for the documentary with them. This proved pivotal in inspiring them to take part.

In public-facing academic projects, like *Lifeline*, building trust takes a considerable amount of time, particularly if the topics covered are sensitive. Previous collaborations with these charities in other projects helped establish trust quickly. However, this certainly did not mean that involving participants in the project was not

fraught with ethical challenges. Requesting video and audio diaries from them without influencing their input demanded a self-reflexive approach that is frequently experienced in undertaking feminist research (Gordon 2019, Redmon 2019). With the three documentaries, made with the tools and support provided within academia, I wanted to create audio-visual platforms for women to voice and share their experiences. This required a critical reflection on the question of: what is the best medium to create that platform? Consolidating feminist scholarship and practice as a method of activism, and becoming an academic filmmaker allowed me to take research outside academia, and contribute to change at personal, political, social and cultural levels.

In all three projects I followed similar strategies for dissemination, including targeted press releases to populate media coverage, and the launch of the films as public screenings followed by private screenings with stakeholders as well as at universities and film festivals. *Growing Up Married* offered visual evidence in the discussions of a bill that became law, and raised awareness of the urgency and intensity of the trauma of forced child marriage. *Lifeline* travelled around the world (UK, US, Canada, India, Turkey and Japan) through international film festivals and was broadcast on Balik Arts TV online, and was submitted as evidence to the Women's Health Strategy Consultation by the UK Government (2021). *Left Behind* is a project that contributes: to the campaigns that aim to change policies related to migrant victims of domestic abuse and gendered violence and the "no recourse to public funds" status; to create knowledge exchange between research and the UK Parliament; and, to raising public awareness on the topic while highlighting the experiences of migrant women, and the influential works of changemakers including legal professionals, politicians, frontline workers and domestic violence charities.

Conclusion

Academic filmmaking allows scholars to act as agents of change, and to create visible evidence of social and political issues that need addressing. Regardless of institutional and bureaucratic requirements related to impact within academia, I argue that, as scholars, we need to ask the question to ourselves and to our own research topics: "So what? Why should anyone care?" In this context, my

research is interested in listening to women's experiences, and making them not only audible but also visible. This, of course, brings up certain questions: What does a film allow that, for example, an academic journal article does not? A research film not only allows us to hear the voices of women but also enables us to directly capture the nuances of gesture, emotion, facial expression and vocal intonation and emphasis. This is particularly powerful in the context of sharing the experiences of women as it allows us to capture not only the *testimony* but to situate that testimony in the women's *current* contexts *as survivors*.

In order to achieve impact through academic documentary filmmaking outside academia, I argue that research questions may need to be formulated within literatures and frameworks outside academia in line with socio-political issues. In addition, potential advocates and stakeholders related to the project should be included within the film from the outset as active agents. Finally, concrete evidence of changes instigated by the project need to be collected from the earliest stages in the form of testimonials, as well as evidence from trust-building activities. Similarly, it is invaluable to integrate policymakers, campaigners and charities into projects from the outset. Additionally, it is equally significant to engage with the media to promote the work as widely as possible and to expose the work to audiences outside academic contexts.

In this article, I have argued that documentary and activist filmmaking offer powerful ways to take existing knowledge and share it effectively to target change in cultural politics and policy. It is for this reason that I invite all scholars to consider making media as a form of activism. The strategies developed within the frame of creative practice afford us alternative ways of promoting change and embedding feminist goals of equality via work with academic and non-academic partners. This paradigm in practice-driven impact is not primarily to be understood as part of an academic narrative, institutional need or proposal for grant acquisition, but a process that places its stakeholders centre-stage and gives them agency towards socio-political awareness, policy change, and activism.

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Documentary and the question of knowledge

Ruthless Times, Songs of Care

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Abstract

Ruthless Times: *Songs of Care /Armotonta menoa – Hoivatyön laulujaan* (Helke 2002) is an acclaimed musical documentary about the privatization of elderly care. I explore how the film was framed by the director Susanna Helke, in written articles and in an interview, as artistic research, and consider how this research engages with the question of knowledge production in terms of the director's stated aims and reference points, particularly Bertolt Brecht and Jacques Rancière. I analyse to what extent, as Helke suggests, it can be seen as creating a "rupture", in Rancière's sense, in relation to previous documentary forms and languages. I argue that while the film faces some of the same issues that critical art often confronts in terms of spectator address, its process of working with its topic and its participants nonetheless embodies a progressive model of feminist witnessing.

Keywords: artistic research, Rancière, feminist, musical documentary, witnessing.

The question of how knowledge is produced, what knowledge, who it is for and who benefits from it has been a key issue in debates about documentary film. Documentary is, therefore, a fruitful site for analysing the kinds of insights that can be produced through making – insights which contribute not only to developing aesthetics and ways of doing, but also to the broader question of what constitutes the 'knowledge' that a creative work can produce. In this article, I focus these broad questions through a discussion of a specific project made in a research context, *Ruthless Times*: *Songs of Care /Armotonta menoa – Hoivatyön laulujaan* (2002), an acclaimed musical documentary about the privatization of elderly care. Firstly, I explore how the film was framed by the director Susanna Helke, in written articles and in an interview, as artistic research, and consider how this research engages with the question of knowledge production in terms of the director's stated aims, and reference points, particularly Bertolt Brecht and Jacques Rancière. I analyse to what extent, as Helke suggests, her film can be seen as creating a "rupture", in Rancière's sense, i.e. a reconfiguration of the habitual "distribution of the sensible" that is "predicated on pre-given distinctions between supposed opposites – between viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity" (Rancière 2009, 12), opposites that Rancière attributes to audiences and directors respectively. Secondly, I consider the other insights that I see the project offering as a form of "feminist witnessing", which exceed the director's own theoretical framing of it, by drawing on interviews I conducted with the main narrator, Tiina Mollberg and the director herself. I argue that while the film faces some of the same issues that other critical art often confronts in terms of its address to spectators, its process of engagement with its topic and its participants nonetheless embodies a progressive model of feminist documentary practice.

Ruthless Times: Songs of Care was made as part of a research project at the University of Aalto Critical Cinema Lab entitled 'Images of Harmony and Rupture: Documentary Film Reflecting Fractures in the Scandinavian Welfare State Ethos' which "intends, through theorising, filmmaking, and colliding theory with praxis, to catalyse new approaches and methods of revealing the paradigm shift in the Finnish welfare state" (Helke 2019a, 210). I begin by discussing how Helke herself articulates her aesthetic approach in *Ruthless Times* in two articles, both published before the film was completed.

In both pieces, the director highlights the importance of the concept of estrangement to her methods, which, Helke (2019b) states, is "at its very core, an emancipatory strategy in art". The subject of the deconstruction of the Scandinavian welfare state demanded a means of representation which departed from the tradition of social documentary which might focus on more immediately observable instances of poverty and injustice; instead, this social and political change was a more "gradual, invisible process". The director cites Eisenstein and Brecht as examples of artists who formulated their poetics in writing which were then embodied in praxis; the former drawing on the latter and other Russian formalists to develop his conception of the *verfremdungseffekt*. Through various devices, such as using songs whose lyrics jarred with their musical style, a montage of scenes as opposed to a linear narrative, this *verfremdungseffekt* is often translated as "the alienation effect". These methods were intended to force the audience to consciously reflect on the social and political drivers of the characters' actions as opposed to having an emotional identification with them. Estrangement, Helke (2019b) proposes, is a necessary and still valid tactic for laying bare neoliberal ideology: "As the politico-economical rhetoric has normalized the paradoxical idea of generating profit

Ruthless Times: Songs of Care © Road Movies Ltd

from caring for the elderly, the cinematic strategies in this film seek to render visible – through dark satire and the defamiliarizing effect of the tableau vivant flash mob scenes with choir music – the absurdity of this logic" (Helke 2019b).

The topic of the privatization of care homes for the elderly, and the resistance to it, is evoked in the film through a hybrid combination of documentary modes. The observational mode is used to cover residents' and council meetings at Kaavi, a small municipality in NE Finland. where decisions are being made to outsource care to a private monopoly. Inventive choral sequences that mock the techno-bureaucratic language of "efficiency" used to quantify careare performed by both elderly residents and by singers playing nurses and interwoven with the observational scenes. Documentation of the development of the new private care home is also juxtaposed with individual stories which are told in participatory mode, in Nichols' (2017) sense, in that they involve testimonies elicited by the film-maker; firstly that of Tiina Mollberg, a nurse shown working in a well-run foundation home, who acted as a whistleblower about conditions in the private facility where she was previously employed, and secondly of the two Vainos, elderly citizens of the town whose wives are in care.

The editing of *Ruthless Times* does not produce the radical clashes of early intellectual montage within individual sequences of the kind we might find in Eisenstein but is instead deployed in how sequences, rather than shots, are counterpointed. Mollberg's careful support of very elderly patients who are slow and confused are intercut with the chorus of nurses' words recounting the lack of time allowed to attend to anyone. Mollberg attending to a dying resident in bed, talking softly to her, giving her painkillers, and washing her face, is intercut with a sequence where a new robot "companion", 'Sara', is being introduced into a Helsinki care home. When a young staff member (the robot designer?) proposes to an elderly resident that he could spend time with 'Sara' today he retorts: "With that thing? Hell no! If that's entertainment we are all dim!". The ideology that that the human needs can be met through these forms of automation is thus thrown into relief – not least because the old man, maybe also playing up to the camera, says he would rather have some entertainment with a "chick" across the room.

A dialectic is proposed both between and within the choral scenes since the affective form of the music is combined with the intriguingly contrasting lyrics, exhibiting a black humour reminiscent of dada and surrealism. For example, in one of the first choral sequences, a tracking shot shows a group of elderly residents who are working out in the gym singing, "The sustainability gap is us…in the land of budget deficits… the public sector, it is us/Bloated way beyond its capacity". This song parodying the rationale behind the attacks on the public sector as inefficient is repeated at various points in the film.

Helke (2019b) wishes to distinguish *Ruthless Times* from historic "social documentary" which she sees as epitomized in John Grierson's "propaganda for good" in the British Documentary Movement, and the photography of Jacob A. Riss and Lewis Hine in which "the subjects are mute bodies providing evidence". She emphasises that her "singing tableaus are used as interruptions which aim to trigger ruptures in the ways reality is addressed and experienced rather than [for the spectator] to find identification within the victim narrative". The director draws on Rancière's concept of "the rupture" - that is a break which confounds the common-sensical notion of how the social is apprehended through the senses. This "distribution of the sensible", "sets the division between what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible" (Sayers n.d.). Rancière argues that:

> Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. (Rancière 2009, 13).

Most critical art, he suggests, does not escape this dualism since it starts from the assumption that the spectator is passive and must be made active, and conscious, by the creative work. This is the case even, Rancière claims, in their contrasting ways, in Bertolt Brecht's and Antonin Artaud's radical theorizations of theatre but the French

philosopher contends that if we eschew this association of viewing with passivity, it is clear that "the spectator also acts, like the pupil or the scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets" (ibid, 13).

One might think if the spectator is really active as Helke implies, following Rancière, why do they need to be jolted into knowledge by the filmmaker through her use of estrangement and montage? And what might "they" know already that means they do not need to be told by the documentarist? Helke's articulation of her project as aiming to make visible the normalization of austerity, albeit through reflexive methods, might be said to still fall into very distribution of the sensible that Rancière critiques. While it is important to deconstruct the ideology which proposes that private companies are necessarily better at running public services especially when the supposed efficiencies and savings are actually socially and economically damaging, it could be argued that those suffering the most from such cuts may well be aware of the flaws of neo-liberal policies and politics from their lived experience.

Rancière refutes the idea that underpins Brecht's conception of epic theatre, i.e. that "[the] spectator must see what the director makes her see" (2009, 14). Yet, the address of *Ruthless Times* could nonetheless be said to be didactic in its desire to have specific effects on the viewer in imparting knowledge of neoliberal economics and its defects through its montage and the use of hybrid modes, even while it avoids direct exposition. This tension between a didactic intention and the wish to prompt the spectator's own political conclusions is course, not an issue peculiar to this film. It is a problem confronted by all "critical art", such as Brecht's and Martha Rosler's, that seeks to create awareness of a political situation through "clash of heterogenous elements provoking a rupture in ways of seeing and, therewith, an examination of the causes of that oddity" (Rancière 2009, 74). In such work, Rancière proposes, "the aesthetic break was absorbed into representational continuity" (75), by which I take him to mean that this art's aesthetic disruptions do not fundamentally question the capacities attributed to makers and viewers respectively, or the power relations implied in them, particularly because they aim at producing a calculated effect, thus reinforcing the sense of aesthetic disconnection between art, artists and "community".

Helke's writing about the film and her presentation of it as creating "a rupture" in representational strategies thus point to a set of much larger questions about the possibility of an explicitly political art, or rather the French philosopher's concern with the ways in which politics itself might be aesthetic, which most documentaries are not able to address, despite their authors' desire to further social change. Instead, I ask: how then might we see the politics of *Ruthless Times* if we shift the focus from the spectator to another implicit question about power - that is, the role of the participants in the film and their relationship to the director?

Documentaries feature real people performing in their everyday lives rather than, in general, professional actors - a key and essential difference from the Brechtian theatre for example that Rancière critiques. The filmmaker Joao Moreira Salles (2009) suggests that the kinds of knowledge a documentary produces, and its desired or supposed impact on the spectator, must be judged by the way it treats its participants, since its rhetoric about social change should not be isolated from its own *modus operandi*. In wrestling with the various attempts to define documentary, he concludes that "we do not succeed in defining the genre by its outward duties, but rather its inward obligations. It is not what can be done with the world, but what cannot be done to the character" (234). I will conclude this essay by looking at how *Ruthless Times* mitigates the issue of the power attached to the role of the director, who crafts the stories of others but also wishes, as Helke puts it, to accept the "undeniable agency and subjectivity" of their participants and assume their equality as a "point of departure" as opposed to something conferred by the filmmaker (Helke 2019b).

I will focus here on the main participant in the film, Tiina Mollberg, who was at the time of filming a nursing union activist, who had been sacked and blacklisted in 2011 for complaining about staffing levels in a private home, at a period when outsourcing to private corporations was proceeding apace in Finland. Along with the letters solicited from nurses around Finland whose words are read or sung in the choral sequences, she is the main source of testimony regarding the conditions in elderly care. To some extent Mollberg's words are recruited to support the film's argument as they usually are in, what Nichols (1997) originally termed the "interactive documentary" and later "participatory documentary", i.e.

where there is an encounter between the director and the contributor and the interaction often revolves around an interview. As Nichols comments, "interviews are a form of hierarchical discourse deriving from the unequal distribution of power, as in the confessional and the interrogation" (Nichols 1997: 47).

In the participatory documentary, contributors' voices are often recruited to the filmmaker's argument, as for instance in Deidre Fischel's film *Care* (2017) which follows severely under-paid, individual carers in their work looking after elderly clients at home. *Care* uses these workers' interview responses on the soundtrack as evidence of their dedication and skill which goes scarcely remunerated and socially unrecognized. The film, though, does not contextualize these experiences as the product of a specific social and economic system or indeed something which could be organized against, thus tending to objectify the carers' emotional testimony as evidence of their victimhood. However, I argue that while the distribution of power in relation to the the crafting of *Ruthless Times* is in Helke's favour, she works with Mollberg to align the "voice" of the documentary with Mollberg's voice to produce a form of feminist witnessing. By "voice of the documentary", I'm referring to Bill Nichols' definition of it as "something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us" (Nichols 1983: 18). I have explored elsewhere (Thynne 2011) how Kim Longinotto's documentaries also enact a feminist witnessing in a different way to align their voice with their subjects' interests. Longinotto, acknowledging the power inequalities between herself and her participants, uses her privileged position as a white woman with a camera in situations of conflict between abusive men and the women they oppress to pressure the men to amend their behaviour.

Ruthless Times enacts a feminist witnessing through its interweaving of the individual speech and appearances of Mollberg with that of the collective speech and performances of other nurses. Mollberg's narration is produced and presented in a more collaborative and performative way than is usual in the participatory documentary. I use the term "performative" to mean involving a deliberate performance on the part of the contributor to foreground aspects of their experience and identity. While the relationship to

the idea of performance, in the simple sense of playing a role, is less evident in Nichol's (2017) discussion of the term "performative", which is somewhat diffuse (149-158), his description of it here and its relationship to "a feminist aesthetic" is pertinent to *Ruthless Times*: "Just as a feminist aesthetic may strive to move audience members, regardless of their actual gender and sexual orientation, into the subjective position of a feminist character's perspective on the world, performative documentary seeks to move its audience into subjective alignment or affinity with its specific perspective on the world" (152).

Helke notes in her interview (2023), that the film is a "shared project" and this is corroborated by Mollberg, who I also interviewed to get her view of the relationship and of the film. Mollberg is happy with the film which she says was a very good experience, even though she feels it may have had some effect on her career (Mollberg 2024). Far from being a victim who is present as "evidence" in *Ruthless Times*, Mollberg already had a high profile on television and in the press around the time of her previous dismissal when she was speaking out about how private profits were sucking funds from care outsourced by councils. Her collaborative working with Helke as a key witness is suggested by the process of creating the narration. Helke drafted a script based on initial interviews, conversations and emails, which was then revised with, and performed by Mollberg for an audio recording in order to "crystallize" the important parts of her story for the film as well as reflecting her specific turns of phrase (Helke 2024). The effect is to underline the narration as a conscious performance, even if this was not an effect which was deliberately intended but was undertaken for pragmatic reasons to condense Mollberg's key points and anecdotes. Such a method avoids putting a participant on the spot in the supposedly more authentic and spontaneous, live interview. Mollberg feels comfortable with how she was represented as she reports that she "felt she was completely herself in the film" (Mollberg 2024). In my interview with Mollberg, she often responded to questions about the film by moving swiftly on to talk about the ongoing cuts and crisis in elderly care in Finland, and their impact on nurses like herself, which suggested to me, not surprisingly, that this was a more important concern for her than the aesthetic and structural particulars of the documentary.

However, in *Ruthless Times*, it is specifically Mollberg's extensive spoken testimony about the abuse and neglect of the elderly that actually renders visible what cannot otherwise be seen. For many reasons it could not be filmed: filming would not be possible in the private care homes where Mollberg and the other nurse complainants worked or work. Also, the patients that Mollberg mentions were also suffering from dementia; to record their suffering and neglect, even if it were possible, would reinforce their victim status. We see her in her current job interacting with patients – who are shown in a dignified a way as possible; when they are able to speak, they are shown joking with her, such as when a woman refers to her diaper as 'rustproofing'. Mollberg comments that the scenes are 'natural as they were shot from my work' suggesting she feels that they portray their situations well. The craft of Helke and her editors, Markus Leppälä, Inka Lahti, Samu Kuuka, then make these scenes emblematic of what good care should mean, through creating a contrast between the time Mollberg is now shown having with each patient, with the overlaid stories of her experience working for her former employer, the private provider.

The edit of the film works to validate her testimony and grant it authority: in an early sequence she recounts how she and one other

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nurse were expected to care for sixty-six patients overnight; she had to leave her dementia ward to help the other nurse, and the patients ran amok so that she could only calm them down playing music and dancing with them until the day shift arrived at seven. Later in the film, she is shown seated in her flat looking at press cuttings which report how, in 2019, the issues of under-staffing resurfaced in the relocated private home. She reads a quotation from one of the clips "The union points to the nursing home in Hameenlina as an example of how not to handle tendering and over-sight", and comments, "and that was eight fucking years ago".

The director links Mollberg's individual experience as a nurse to the testimonies of the very many other nurses, whose words recounting the impossibility of providing adequate care in a profit-driven corporate culture form the basis of the choral song lyrics in the musical sequences. The chorus motif is as an innovative form of witnessing distinct from the more individualized focus of earlier examples of the genre such as *Drinking for England* (1998) and *Feltham Sings* (2002) by British director Brian Hill, described as "documusicals", by Derek Paget and Jane Pascoe (2006). In *Drinking for England*, the sudden transformation of alcohol users into active performers who sing, works like in *Ruthless Times* to undercut the participants' stereotyping as victims. However, in Hill's films the focus is on individual characters who reveal themselves in song, like we might expect from a classical film musical.

In *Ruthless Times* the demeanour of the singers, who are a combination of actual nurses and performers, is deadpan rather than expressive: a tracking shot and close ups show their exhausted faces, revealing how they, like their patients, are also potentially vulnerable as they are not the "young brisk workers" against which the optimization system measures performance but mostly middle-aged and elderly women. The use of the song sequences to show these women *as a group* singing in a collective voice in this largely female and relatively low-paid profession is what makes the project a specifically feminist one, since it highlights the structural as opposed to personal circumstances that have led to a dereliction of social care with awful consequences for both carers and patients.

The perspectives of nurses who have been silenced in terms of being able to speak publicly about their employers are made present in the film in a way which protects them while exposing the

political and economic reasons for their systemic marginalization. The film's witnessing in this way is not something that Helke's own articles on the project identify, but her interview reveals that it is a creative solution that emerged in the process of making. She states (Helke 2023) that it became clear that the large volume of vital testimony from the nurses' letters needed to find a prominent place in the film even though the speakers themselves could not be directly shown or identified, and so the strategy of translating their words into song lyrics was devised in collaboration with the film's composer, Anna-Mari Kähärä. The role of the film team, not in "giving voice" to contributors, but in "orchestrating" their voices, aligning the film with their existing perspectives and activism and highlighting their political context, is an important contribution to feminist documentary practice and to the knowledge it can produce. I mentioned earlier that Ranciere's critique of radical art focuses on examples from Brechtian drama and photographic montage, and not on documentary featuring the words and experiences of real people. *Ruthless Times'* hybrid form is not *per se* what supports its claim to create a rupture with the usual hierarchies between viewing and acting or doing, I suggest, but its elicitation and deployment of the women's testimony in unexpected and affirmative ways to underline the contradiction between care and profit. The agentic performance of this testimony by both Mollberg and the singing nurses is a key element within the hybrid modes of the film that articulates what otherwise might be unsayable.

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Thinking diegetically

Spatiotemporal principles and mimetic rhetorical functions in videographic criticism

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Abstract

In the process of thinking diegetically, the videographic practitioner is guided by the diegetic (story world) logic of the films or media works under scrutiny. As opposed to videographic approaches that extract audiovisual segments from a narrative and spatiotemporal logic, this form of videographic work engages with the constraints of the source materials' diegetic tethers to (re)construct a story world in meaningful and productive ways. This essay seeks to explore the ramifications of such diegetic argumentation through an analysis of several videographic works: the author's "Imagining Orphée | Orphée imaginé" (Oyallon-Koloski 2023), Catherine Grant's "Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade" (2018), Dayna McLeod's "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*" (2023), and Liz Greene's "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name" (2022). These examples embrace the intrinsic form of their source material's diegesis, prioritize the rhetorical impact of spatiotemporal construction, and deliberately balance the pulls between original and videographic diegetic logic through the application of precise videographic techniques. Video essayists use the formal,

performative, and nonverbal options afforded by centering diegetic principles in powerful ways to shape their rhetoric.

Keywords: videographic criticism, film narration, spatiotemporal functions, rhetoric, film form

Introduction

Do video essays have a diegesis, that is, a coherent story world that shapes their narrative and rhetorical organization? I often put this question to the students in my videographic criticism course to get them thinking about how principles from filmmaking can translate to their own academic and creative process. Many methods used in the academic filmmaking practice of videographic criticism come from film studies (history, theory, criticism) and other humanistic disciplines. Because of the practice-led nature of this scholarship's audiovisual form, methods from film and video production are also inherent to the work, the application of editing principles in particular. From a practice standpoint what does it mean, then, to be guided by the diegetic, or spatiotemporally grounded, logic of the films or media works under scrutiny? This is often a significant starting point for videographic work, as Jason Mittell articulates (2019, 226), but certain modes of videographic scholarship deliberately extract the material from its original diegetic logic. We can observe this in Mittell's own videographic deformations of *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952), where the goal is to "break" the film according to various formal parameters by intentionally distancing the work from its original narrative and spatiotemporal realms (2021). These videographic methods can emphasize non-diegetic or non-narrative elements to create powerful arguments, elements like authoritative voiceovers (Keathley 2011, 180), text-and-image relationships (Keathley, Mittell, and Grant 2019), multiscreen and supercut approaches (Groo 2012), parametric constraints (O'Leary 2021, Mittell 2021), or artefact-driven and presentational modes (Lee and Avissar 2023, Kiss 2021). Other video essays engage with the constraints of the source materials' diegetic tethers to (re)construct a story world in meaningful and productive ways. In "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name," for example, Liz Greene re-edits an adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* to center a marginalized character and the actor who plays him, altering the

story to correct an omission in histories of film. This piece answers the question that opens this essay with a resounding "yes!" Within such a mode of material thinking (Grant 2014), diegetic logic anchors the creative thought process.

This essay seeks to explore the ramifications of such diegetic argumentation through an analysis of several videographic works that embrace the intrinsic form of their source material's diegesis, prioritize the rhetorical impact of spatiotemporal construction, and deliberately balance the pulls between original and videographic diegetic logic through the application of precise videographic techniques. This idea connects to a larger topic of videographic narration and how videographic practitioners, like filmmakers, have used narrative modes to structure their work and construct videographic characters or narrators as we can see in pieces like Chloé Galibert-Laîné's "Watching *The Pain of Others*" (2019), Jason Mittell's "*Adaptation*'s Anomalies" (2016), or Kevin B. Lee's "Talking with Siri About Spike Jonze's *Her*" (2014). These pieces often incorporate extensive original audiovisual footage (voiceovers, video, performances, and screen captures) to reshape the existing material. In contrast, I am particularly interested here in works, like Catherine Grant's "Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade" (2018), Dayna McLeod's "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*" (2023), and Liz Greene's "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name" (2022), that willingly allow themselves to be restricted by the source material's diegetic form, resulting in limited videographic interventions. Notably, as we learn from the videos themselves and the written statements accompanying them, the material output of these video essays is often impacted by the original work's resistance to a diegetic restructuring, revealing insights about the film as well as the videographic practitioner's process.

Spatiotemporal principles

In narrative filmmaking, the "diegesis" refers to an intrinsically coherent story world that shapes the media object's spatiotemporal logic through the deliberate selection of images and sounds. In thinking about this diegetic construction, we may first focus on the unfolding of the narrative and the differences between plot (syuzhet) and story (fabula). Whereas the story encompasses the "action as a chronological cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within

a given duration and a spatial field," plot refers to the actual presentation and arrangement of those actions (Bordwell 1985, 49–50). While these formal narrative choices are predominantly dramaturgical, we must also not ignore the more technical side of this storytelling process. Film narration unfolds through temporal and spatial construction; videographic works that take advantage of this diegetic mode tend to selectively alter a few spatiotemporal elements of the chosen source material while keeping the remaining diegetic tethers in place.

A film's diegetic logic arises from the control of plot, story, and screen time through the ordering, duration, and frequency of events and from the construction of "scenographic" spaces: within the shot, through editing, and in sound design (Bordwell 1985, 113). Whereas position or perspective is often a central concern in an analysis of film narration and space (Morgan 2021), an emphasis on spatial construction is central to the argumentative rigor of these videographic forms. Viewers make sense of a film's story and diegesis through a parsing of the gaps in the plot, and these absences are precisely what mobilizes this videographic process. David Bordwell discusses gaps in relation to the absence of explicit story information that the viewer must intuit from cues in the film (1985, 100), but videographic creators use this idea of gaps in a much more practical and material way, taking advantage of elements like characters' off-screen presence (essential for the construction of shot/reverse shot editing patterns), negative space, and silence, to rework a film's diegetic logic.

Sometimes videographic practitioners apply this practice to rethink the intrinsic patterns of a single film, drawing attention to the choices made in the original work and to the new meanings created by this alternate diegetic (in)coherence. In other instances, bringing together material from multiple sources allows the academic filmmaker to work stylistically, ethnographically, speculatively, or counterfactually through the extrinsic juxtaposition of diegetic approaches combined with historical or embodied context. Formal systems cue the film audience to construct a coherent story, but they also constrain and cut off meanings to reinforce a specific narrative comprehension (Bordwell 1985, 49). Videographic practitioners accordingly break these spatiotemporal rules to alter or re-introduce meaning into these audiovisual texts.

Mimetic rhetorical functions

In considering the persuasiveness of videographic criticism's rhetoric we can see how the nonverbal, performative aspects often outpace any written (or spoken) accompaniments (Grant 2016). While some modes of narration emphasize a telling, mimetic forms of narration emphasize a showing, with early Aristotelian conceptions of *mimesis* translating roughly to "the imitation of animate beings . . . by the body and the voice" (Bordwell 1985, 3–4). As with Christian Keathley's distinction between explanatory and poetic forms of videographic criticism (Keathley 2011, 181), most narrative forms draw on both modes of telling and showing. Videographic scholar-practitioners employing mimetic, or imitative, narrative techniques mobilize the rhetorical advantages of diegetic manipulation to reveal important knowledge about their objects of study.

One strength of diegetically-focused videographic arguments is the power that derives from re-orienting the viewer in relation to the original source material through an altering of the film's spatiotemporal logic. Adopting the idea of a diegetic coherence through the application of (new) diegetic rules can provide a rhetorical persuasiveness through a narrative-driven logical cohesion. When it comes to creating a coherent flow of action, time, and space across shots, no other system is more widely used by editors to ensure narrative clarity than continuity editing, used in conjunction with the application of these principles to the filming of the action and stemming from the work of earlier avant-garde filmmaking practices such as Soviet Montage or Maya Deren's experimental cinema. Creating a continuity of movement, screen direction, and eye-lines across cuts is possible through an adherence to a consistent axis of action and a selective placement of camera set-ups, and videographic practitioners take advantage of this spatial segmentation. Significantly, however, cues from the film's form aid in the viewer's understanding of spatial representation, and enough of those cues must carry over for videographic works to convey an argumentative plausibility.

I use continuity principles in "Imagining Orphée | Orphée imaginé," to impose a diegetic logic that connects Jacques Demy's *Parking* (1985), an adaptation of the Orpheus myth, with shots from Jean-Luc Godard's *Détective* (1985) to counterfactually analyze Demy's casting choices (Oyallon-Koloski 2023). I wanted to envision a

version of *Parking* with an alternate actor, knowing that Demy had expressed interest in casting Johnny Hallyday as Orpheus in his film. Hallyday appears instead in *Détéctive*, and the film serves as a historical record of the actor on screen during the same period. However, the lack of appropriate gaps in *Parking* and *Détéctive* did not allow me to easily change the romantic pairings in Demy's film, as the filmmaker frequently shows his couples with depth staging and in two-shots. Demy shoots key scenes between Orpheus (Francis Huster) and Persephone (Marie-France Pisier), by contrast, in a shot/reverse shot pattern, making it possible to insert shots of Hallyday from *Détéctive*. The juxtaposition is convincing, however, because of the films' diegetic compatibility. Tighter framings on the actors' eye-lines into the off-screen space match up, Demy conveniently stages a waiter to block Huster's body as Pisier delivers one of her lines, and both scenes are set in Parisian cafés with similar décor (figures 1 and 2). Diegetic continuity of eye-line matches and correspondences of the mise-en-scène help to strengthen the plausibility of inserting a new performer in this counterfactual experiment, and the result draws attention to Demy's inclusion of Persephone's power ambitions in his adaptation of Orpheus' story.

Figure 1: A shot of Marie-France Pisier as Persephone in Jacques Demy's *Parking* shows her looking off-screen left as she speaks to a character (Orpheus) who I "re-cast" as Johnny Hallyday "Imagining Orphée | Orphée imaginé."

Figure 2: I juxtapose the image in Figure 1 with this shot of Johnny Hallyday in Jean-Luc Godard's *Détéctive* to imagine him as the main character (Orpheus) in Demy's film. Hallyday's gaze off-screen right matches Pisier's eye-line in the set-up from *Parking*.

The rhetorical value of altering a film's diegesis to create a shift of perspective is particularly visible in queer videographic arguments. Using divergent videographic techniques, Catherine Grant in "Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade" and Dayna McLeod in "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*" rework the diegesis of a single film to highlight its intrinsic formal design and emphasize the material's queer resonances. Grant describes "Fated to be Mated" as a queer remix that defamiliarizes the existing heterosexual romance between Cyd Charisse's and Fred Astaire's characters (Grant 2018). Through a multi-screen approach, Grant fractures the diegesis of a duet from *Silk Stockings* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1957). to make us rethink the relationship portrayed on screen (figure 3). Through a division of the sequence's single shot into two segments and a manipulation of their size, Grant changes the diegesis' spatial coherence, an act she describes as a "queer experiment in cinephilic re-spatialisation" (Grant 2018). Side-by-side screens in videographic works more often create a sense of simultaneity than of spatial contiguity, but Grant's piece evokes a dual register of both spatial correspondence – through the clear passage of characters across the screens – and spatial separation – through the act of segmentation and the negative space that separates the two

halves of the original composition. This choice to break *Silk Stocking*'s spatiotemporal logic parallels the musical genre's tendency to generate a plurality of diegetic spaces through the inclusion of heightened musical numbers. In addition to the multi-screen spatial adjustment, Grant slows down the danced sequence and replaces the soundtrack. These changes also draw greater attention to how the characters in *Silk Stockings* fill – or don't fill – the diegetic space. As Grant notes in the video essay's accompanying text, the number's choreography emphasizes a frontal facing and a greater use of lateral staging which draws attention to the egalitarian nature of the characters' relationship. Beyond this, the inclusion of negative space around the frame(s) makes the unactivated space within the frame even more apparent, despite the frequent horizontality of the dancers' movements. Grant's focus on re-spatialization presents this early CinemaScope film through a multiscreen intervention that turns the shot into two side-by-side frames that are more reminiscent of the 1:1.37 academy ratio than the 1:2.35 CinemaScope one. Hermes Pan, one of *Silk Stockings*' choreographers, was vocally resistant to the formal impositions of the widescreen aspect ratio (Franceschina 2012, 224), and "Fated to be Mated: An

Figure 3: In "Fated to be Mated," Catherine Grant uses multi-screen techniques to alter the spatial diegetic logic of *Silk Stockings*.

Architectural Promenade" becomes a playful diegetic parallel to an earlier number in the film, "Stereophonic Sound," that mocks the excess of diegetic space.

Using visual overlays in addition to multi-screen compositions, Dayna McLeod addresses this idea of shifting perspectives through diegetic manipulation in her videographic work on Donna Deitch's film *Desert Hearts* (1985). By adding a literal "talking head" recording of herself as a layer over the faces of the film's key characters in "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*," McLeod materially imposes her point of view on those characters through her videographic intervention to challenge the original film's representation of lesbian desire and aging women (McLeod 2023). Her voiceover commentary carries over the shots, creating a unifying sonic space, while the video of her talking moves through the videographic space, at times filling the frame, at times side-by-side with the footage of *Desert Hearts*, and most often in an oval matte overlaying the faces of *Desert Heart*'s multiple female characters (figure 4). McLeod's shifting spatial relationship to the film parallels her autoethnographic analysis as she investigates her thoughts about

Figure 4: In "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*," Dayna McLeod superimposes a talking head of herself over *Desert Hearts* to simultaneously engage critically and performatively with the film's characters.

the characters in the film while also enhancing the intentionally lighthearted tone of the piece. Her talking head overlays match the diegetic placement and relative size of characters in the frame, resizing as their depth position changes and moving with them as they travel. In contrast, McLeod maintains a frontal facing in her talking head recording even as the characters behind her rotate or are faced away from the camera and keeps the sharp edge of the matte visible, both incorporating herself into the source material's diegesis and maintaining a critical distance. As part of her voiceover commentary, she also emphasizes how *Desert Hearts*' narrative choices impacted the construction of an earlier videographic piece on the film, "s/mother love/r" (2022), where discoveries about the diegetic characters' ages shifted her attention to consider how female aging is represented in the film.

In addition to its stylistic, autoethographic, queer, and speculative affordances, this practice has methodological value to counterfactual historical approaches. This work can open onto what Katherine Groo describes as "the possibility of new film histories and historiographic futures" (Groo 2012). Liz Greene uses the power of diegetic unmaking in "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name" (Greene 2022) to re-center attention on Black actor Spencer Bell, who plays the Cowardly Lion in the 1925 film *The Wizard of Oz* (Larry Semon). As Greene's historical analysis demonstrates, Bell was denied the respect his craft deserved during his Hollywood career because of his race, and they break the film's diegetic order and duration as a formal parallel to their condemnation of these institutional and cultural failures. "Spencer Bell" alters the 1925 film's spatiotemporal logic by running the footage in reverse and including only the moments with Bell on-screen. The film's feature-length duration reduces to merely twelve minutes of plot time, comprised of 54 sequences. Greene emphasizes how these videographic interventions impact the narrative, arguing in their research statement that these changes "allowed me to tell the story of the film differently, to disrupt the narrative, to offer instead a radical oppositional text" (Greene 2022), with their voiceover in the video essay frequently emphasizing the new narrative imposed by these editing decisions. Greene reverses the sound of the music as well but includes it as a single segment on the soundtrack under the voiceover, creating a new unifying sonic space that connects the oppositional

diegetic logic that emerges from the reversed and extracted images. In this diegetic logic, Bell's centrality becomes more important to the intrinsic logic than a spatial sense of continuity through maintained eye-line matches or screen direction. Significantly, observing the formal composition of the 1925 film changed Greene's research project, as they discuss in their creator's statement, moving the work away from *The Wizard of Oz* and its adaptations to instead focus on Spencer Bell's marginalized presence. In connecting a diegetic spatiotemporal logic with both spoken and shown rhetorical strategies, Greene's work demonstrates the counterfactual power of mimetic narration in videographic criticism. Their explanatory voiceover explicitly lays out the problematic racial representations present in Bell's character and historicizes the origins of such racist portrayals of African American performers. However, through a temporal reversal of the film's diegesis, which simultaneously draws the viewer's attention to the film's choices and undermines their original intent, Greene works to resist the potential of re-presenting those hurtful stereotypes.

Conclusion

Videographic scholars are aware of the argumentative strengths of mimetic narrative principles and often draw upon these established formal techniques to guide viewer attention and shape their audiovisual material. This more audiovisual way of thinking, as Ben Spatz theorizes, cannot and should not replace the "writing way of thinking" or a continued understanding of the embodied practices that precede either (Spatz 2018, 151–152), and academic filmmakers are keenly aware of the advantages of both modes. In attempting this exercise of thinking diegetically, the videographic practitioner analyzes the intrinsic norms of the diegeses in question through a practice-led analytical process, and the ability to create plausible diegetic correspondences communicates much about the material's stylistic and narrative compatibility, or lack thereof. Studying the rhetorical potential of diegetic principles in videographic criticism reminds us that the audiovisual elements under scrutiny are always formally "speaking" for themselves, in addition to the argumentative and aesthetic frames imposed by the video essayist. As Christian Keathley argues, "the incorporation of images into the explanatory text—especially moving images and sounds—demands an

acknowledgement that such images, themselves quite mysterious and poetic, do not always willingly subordinate themselves to the critical language that would seek to control them" (Keathley 2011, 190). Harnessing the spatiotemporal logic of these images and sounds is one way of connecting the divergent communication modes of the source material and the resulting videographic creation. Using both intrinsic and extrinsic combinations of audiovisual materials, video essayists use the formal, performative, and nonverbal options afforded by thinking diegetically in powerful ways to shape their rhetoric.

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Unsettling bodies

Video essay as embodied research

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Abstract

This paper proposes a fundamental new understanding of videographic research as an embodied practice and of the video essay as a "mingled body": Not only does the video essay fuse multiple film materials and diverging artistic and scientific methods into a new body of media. The video essay also engages the bodies of both its makers and viewers in new and unsettling ways. Via a theoretical discussion of the video essay's body as well as via two concrete examples of embodied video essays the potentials of videographic research for a more vulnerable, non-normative academia of the future are outlined.

Keywords: videographic research, embodiment, performativity, vulnerability, mingling

"What it meant to make things with my body… All the things…"
Katie Bird

The video essay is unsettling. The video essay unsettles the academic classroom as well as the spaces of cinema. It does so because its own place is not settled, not within the humanities, nor academia as a whole, nor within film history and audiovisual culture at large. The place of the video essay is not settled, I would claim, not simply because it is a somewhat young form which still needs to find its place within these respective fields. Rather, and more fundamentally, the video essay, as I try to understand and practice it, lives in different disciplines and methodologies at once and thus resists the logic of defining positioning.

1. Forces of the video essay

Christian Keathley in one of the earliest assessments of the video essay situated videographic practice on a spectrum between explanatory and poetic modes of expression (2011), and more recently Jason Mittell added the "exploratory impulse" as a third mode of expression (2024). Expanding from this dynamic yet, in my opinion, still too linear understanding, I propose another model in which the video essay is not so much defined by certain modes of expressions but rather by different orientations of interest. Thus, I see the video essay vibrating within a multi-dimensional tension field with the theoretical, the experimental, the personal and the historical as its different gravitational attractors and orientations. (fig. 1): video essays, by using existing film material, engage with the material's

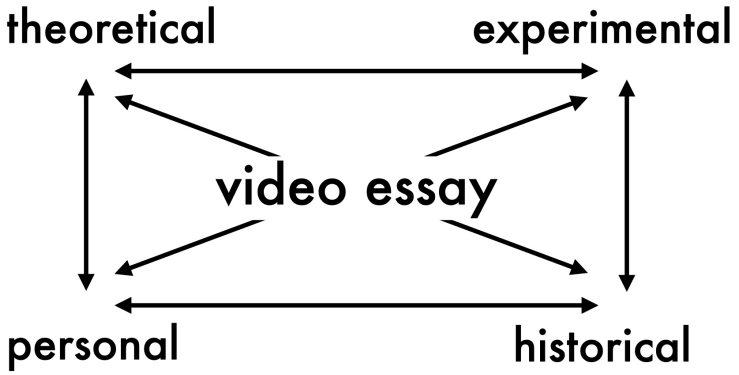

Fig. 1: The video essay tension field

specific *histories*, while the selection of the material is most likely guided by certain t*heoretical* interests. Yet, by remixing the existing film material I turn it into my own footage with which I *experiment* and in doing so, I am inevitably *personally* involved.

The advantage of such a diagrammatic approach, despite its obvious simplifications, is to render visible how video essays are traversing both what is usually understood as proper academic methodology as well as what we are accustomed to in artistic practices. While having recourse to theoretical arguments and working with historical data can be seen as skills highly typical of academic training, the exploration of the personal and the engagement in free experimentation is something we would rather associate with artistic practice (fig.2).

Instead of a mere traversal we witness what could also be called a "queering" of methods thought of before as separate. (As a general introduction into "queering" as critical practice see Hall (2003, 1-16), while I am particularly indebted here to Sara Ahmed's project of queering phenomenology (2006).)

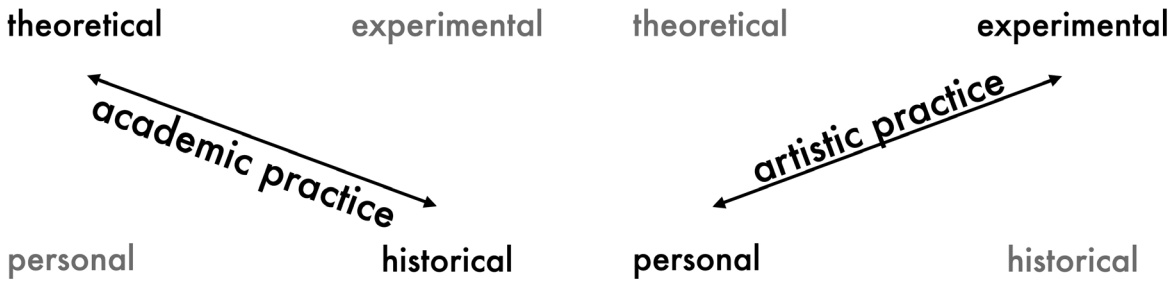

Fig. 2: Axes of practice

The proposed diagram could be used to distinguish different styles of video essays by how they gravitate more to one corner or axis than to the others. However, the true potential of the video essay, as I see it, is in how it can fold these opposing pulls into one and the same videographic work. Furthermore, I think it is precisely this mixture of diverging forces and orientations that explains certain reservations video essays will face with specific audiences. It has happened to me more than once that the same video essay when screened at an experimental film festival was appreciated for its visual language while its inclusion of quotes and references to theo-

retical texts seemed surprising and provoked the criticism that I "did not fully trust the power of film". Yet when shown at an academic conference it was, unsurprisingly, rather the video's historical-theoretical axis that was appreciated while its audiovisual experiments, and in particular the fact that I would include my own physical body in these experiments, seemed to make some of my academic colleagues rather uncomfortable. In both reactions I see a binary opposition at play which tries to pit embodied practice against analytical thought – a false yet still powerful binary which seems oblivious to the fact that every practice is always already entangled in abstract reflection, while every analysis is inevitably performative, never just taking place in some ideal realm of pure thought but enacted in, through, and with concrete bodies.

While all this is true for artistic and scholarly practice in general, I believe that the video essay makes particularly striking use of this complex entanglement. The video essay as a form of "material thinking", as Catherine Grant has called it, "a form of understanding with the hands and eyes" (2014, 50) inextricably merges physical interaction and analytical reflection. And it does so not as a stable method, but in constantly changing new ways.

2. The video essay as "mingled body"

The video essay as unsettled and unsettling practice does not arrive at a clearly delineated form but is rather what Michel Serres called a "mingled body" – a body in which separations are constantly overstepped, shifted and remapped, be it the separation between different parts of a body, between inside and outside, between human and non-human, between delayed contemplation and instinctive reaction.

> Consciousness belongs to those singular moments when the body is tangential to itself. I touch my lips, which are already conscious of themselves, with my finger. I can then kiss my finger and, what amounts to almost the same thing, touch my lips with it. The I vibrates alternately on both sides of the contact, and all of a sudden presents its other face to the world, or, suddenly passing over the immediate vicinity, leaves behind nothing but an object. In the local gesture of calling for silence, the body plays ball

> with the soul. […] There is no end to it, the only limit is your own suppleness. Metaphysics begins with, and is conditioned by, gymnastics. (Serres 2008, 23)

The body in Serres' project of anti-cartesian metaphysics is not just a metaphor. Instead, physical bodies, our own, as well as the bodies of others, and the bodies of different objects and materials are to be taken as topologically folded spaces of both experience and analysis. Obviously, this mingled body is also one in which the different gravitational forces and axes of the diagram above cross and queer each other.

I would claim that it is this insistence on the body which is also one of the main challenges (but also promises) that the video essay poses for academic research. As bell hooks has argued in her theory of radical liberatory pedagogy, the bodies of scholars and students pose a threat to the self-understanding of academia: "Once we start talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies, we're automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space. […] Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits" (hooks 1994,136-138).

Following this call for an embodied practice of teaching, I believe that the video essay as a mingled body could also challenge (and reshape) what we understand as academic research. The video essay as such a form of embodied research and "epistemology of practice" (Spatz 2015, 23-70) has in the last years become the main focus in my own videographic work; most notably so in my video essay series "Practices of Viewing" in which each video experimentally explores a specific media technique and its complex entanglements with both our own personal history, as well as with the history of cinema, with the materiality of media and that of our own bodies.

In the following, however, I would like to sketch out the potential of video essay as an unsettling mingled body and the potential it holds for academic research via two video essays which put the physical presence of the scholar as a mingled body even more directly on stage, asking the questions: How do video essays unsettle

the body of film? How do they unsettle our own body? And how do they unsettle how bodies interact?

3. "Crossings"

Fig. 3: Screenshot from "Crossings"
https://vimeo.com/412879847

The video essay "Crossings" from 2020 interweaves two research interests, which on first sight seem to be located in completely different realms. One is the phenomenon of the so-called Freak with its ambivalent cultural history of both horrible exploitation as well as potential empowerment and visibility for non-normative bodies. The other is a media theoretical interest in glass surfaces in films as not only a common visual motif but as a self-reflexive trope for the cinematic medium in general.

While having taught and written on both topics separately I see them come together in Ulrike Ottinger's classic of queer cinema *Freak Orlando* (1981) – a film that itself is constantly crossing and combining different contexts (most notably, as already the title shows, Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* with the phenomenon of the Freak show). I see these interests fusing in one scene in particu-

lar, where two bodies touch – the body of Freak/goddess Orlanda Zyklopa (played by Magdalena Montezuma) and the body of department store announcer Helena Müller (played by Delphine Seyrig). However, the two bodies do not touch directly since a glass door is between them. And as if to highlight this separation, paint is spilled onto the glass. Yet paradoxically, the paint, as it is dripping down the transparent surface, becomes an interface for haptic encounter: Seyrig's hand spreading the red paint across the surface with each wiping motion constantly reconfigures what can be seen and what cannot. She handles the partition between her own and the other body not as a clear boundary but rather as a semi-opaque painting surface that can be continuously reshaped. The visible and the invisible literally flow together in the movement of hand and paint on glass. Limits become fluid.

Not only does this scene seem to reflect on cinema's own paradoxical mediality (the sheet of glass as an analogy to the lens of the camera and to the invisible fourth wall of the cinema screen as a a screen which renders visible while at the same time hiding ("screening off") something else); but it is also in this very concrete and visible liquefaction of separations that I see the topic of non-normative bodies addressed. The freakish body exists, according to Elizabeth Grosz, "outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts of and modes of self-definition" (1996, 57). Thus, I would argue, the film scenes enacts – not just in its narrative, but also in its audiovisual form – a media philosophy as well as a reflection on the queer body and combines these two concerns. The scene itself can therefore already be read as a complexly mingled body.

While already having published a short written essay on this (Binotto 2018), making "Crossings" turned out to be something very different than just an audiovisual adaptation of a previous article. While all the discourses outlined above are still present within the video essay, more aspects found their way into the video, some intentionally and some accidentally. My analysis became a re-enactment: Instead of simply inserting Ottinger's original footage into my own video I captured it by filming its projection onto a sheet of glass behind which I then posited myself, thus repeating the very situation within Ottinger's film. In doing that, not only is the scholar becoming a filmmaker, but, even more crucially, instead of remain-

ing on the position of an outside observer, I insert myself as participant into the very film scene I am analyzing. The scholar's/filmmaker's body blends with the body of the characters in the film as well as with the body of the film material itself. To me, the most satisfying moments of the video essay are then those instances when it is no longer clear what we are witnessing: Are we seeing the paint in Ottinger's film, or the paint that I apply on my glass sheet? Are these the bodies in Ottinger's film or is it my body? Instead of clearly separating all these different modes of existence they begin to intermingle, like in those moments in which my hand seems to touch the hand of Delphine Seyrig or when our faces merge.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that these precious effects were not really visible to me while I was performing: Since the projector was directed at me, I could not see the projected image. Instead, I had to perform "blindly" with the projection only becoming visible to me when applying paint onto the glass in front. However, by applying the paint I became myself less and less visible – yet another re-take on the above outlined dialectics of visibility and invisibility in cinema. Finally, the resulting blurry and unclear images of my video essay could be an example of what Alan O'Leary more recently has called a "nebular epistemics", a form of videographic practice that is "speaking from a condition of immersion in a phenomenon" (2023).

Thus, the dense complexity of these mere four minutes – a complexity I feel unable to fully understand or describe – was the result of a mostly "blind" and unrehearsed performance. Very much in opposition to the scientific principle of reproducibility, I can neither repeat this video essay nor was it possible to fully prepare for it. Instead – and very much like the film scene it is engaging with – this video essay functions as a stage for the elusive and uncontrollable to manifest. Still, the spontaneous performance is grounded on years of research into this particular film and its manifold topics. Thus, the performance, for all its unpredictability, is very much connected to, resulting from, and again pointing to theoretical arguments such as those outlined above. Performance and reflection, iterable argument and non-iterable event surround and cross each other mutually, like the topological figure of a Klein bottle. Adding to this paradoxical mingling of iterability and non-iterability is the fact that the video, while showing a non-iterable performative act is

presented to us not as a single performance, but rather as a video that can be shown repeatedly.

Paradoxes such as these have of course been thoroughly discussed in the context of performativity studies and in regards to questions of embodied research (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2012, Spatz 2015, Spatz 2020). Yet their implications are still not fully recognized when it comes to videographic practice in an academic context. The resistance to do so, I suspect, has to do with how the video essay seen as an experimental performative approach puts into question the notions of academic scholarly expertise and authority. To take the example of "Crossings": In a very literal sense I present myself in this video essay, but I present myself not as I would normally do when standing as a scholar in front of an academic audience. Rather than just presenting theoretical arguments, I am "doing" them – experimentally, gingerly, not pretending to be in full command. And as in the video my body is mingling with the film body, so too does the mingled body of the video essay disintegrate the body of scholarly authority.

As I argued elsewhere, the scholarly practice of video essay is thus revealed to be a "parapraxis" – a practice that does not claim complete control but which is opened up to disruptions, deformations, and contingencies, seeing them not as mere accidents but as critical encounters and forms of thought (Binotto 2021). Accordingly, "Crossings" allows for a crossing of scholarly knowledge and accidental event, not only within the video essay but also within my body and perception, as well as within the body and the perception of the audience. And what the video essay asks of their makers and viewers is a form of engagement that does not end with cognitively understanding the video's argument but tries to decenter our bodies and perceptions within and through the video.

4. "gestures of thought: hold"

This video essay from 2023 is the first in a new series on bodily gestures as forms of thought. The topic of the first video in the series, the gesture of holding, is ubiquitous and banal, but also foundational: just think of how we were all first carried and held as not yet born children. We hold something, we hold each other, we hold ourselves as much as we are held by others, by structures, by gravity. Not surprisingly, moments of holding in cinema are common-

[Fig. 4: Screenshot from "gestures of thought: hold"]
https://vimeo.com/858392950/8773b09f74

places – but understood not just in a deprecating but also literal sense of a place of and for the commons, as something we all share and which *holds* us together.

Thus, we could reflect on the rich meaning gestures of holding assume in cinema – a topic discussed repeatedly by Alain Bergala in his collection of texts *La création cinéma* – a book which I then hold in my video (Bergala 2015), (see also the video essay "Tensions" by Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin using Bergala's concept of the interval for their film analysis). However, from film moments showing holding gestures I move to myself holding film objects: a camera, a film can, finally asking the question how to hold a film. Indeed, the paradox of holding gestures in films is that they are given to us not as an image held still but as moving images. Actually, things are even more complicated: the moving images, although never holding still, are also not continuously moving; rather, analogue film cameras and projectors move the film strip not continuously but intermittently. We thus recognize film as rather a combi-

nation or mingling of slipping and holding. It is this combination of stillness and movement, as it forms the basis of cinematic illusion, that I then enact by recreating a classic of experimental cinema, Gary Beydler's *Pasadena Freeway Stills* – a film that itself is a mingled body, as much experimental performance as it is a media theoretical lesson on the technology of film (cf. Minas 1989, 249-250).

But while Beydler uses views of the Pasadena freeway to present cinema's dialectic between still and moving images, the images I work with come with more film historical baggage. They are from Robert Wiene's 1920 classic *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and more specifically from the scene in which the sleepwalking Cesare is first introduced and brought to life by his oppressor Caligari – a moment therefore that itself is torn between control and letting go. This seems even more poignant when we consider how much this film and this scene in particular have been discussed in relation to questions of the control and destruction of human bodies (cf. Kaes 2009, 45-86).

Here I become part of the cinematic apparatus, enacting what otherwise a camera would do and thus performing and explaining film technology at the same time. Instead of the scholar as a "talking head", I become a "doing body" (whose head is not to be seen). Still, the actions of the body are as much theoretical as they are physical.

In doing so I not only reference Beydler and the tradition of self-reflexive experimental cinema. But I also react to the research of fellow videographer Katie Bird on filmmaking labor. In particular, I react to her desktop documentary video essay "With a Camera in Hand, I Was Alive" and the introduction to this piece in the journal NECSUS (Bird 2023). Both in her video essay and the introduction Bird highlights the physicality and embodiment of camera work, while also connecting the holding of a camera to other practices of holding, like – most notably – holding a child. Obliquely, but all the more movingly, Bird thus crosses the personal with the professional, the mechanical with the breathing, the feminist intervention with economic analysis. And eventually, when she claims that her video will remain an unfinished piece, she asks the question how to continue a scholarly research project while letting it go. That we can hold onto something by letting it go,is an idea in which Katie Bird's work resonates with me both professionally and personally, and which I take as a productive artistic method as well as a radical

scholarly position. It touches me to an extent that I cannot really fully express, and it is this to which I try to respond, performatively and analytically, in my own video essay.

5. Towards videographic vulnerability and a more vulnerable academia

The idea of holding on through letting go should also have major consequences for how to think of scholarly practice. It could be taken as a plea for letting go of a certain kind of "scholarly performance" which is often concerned with proving established knowledge and control, and instead dare to show yourself and your argumentation as vulnerable. It is such a "videographic vulnerability" (Kreutzer and Binotto 2023) that I see at work in Katie Bird's video and to which I would want to expose both myself and my audience through video essay work. With that I try to make a plea for a more vulnerable academia, an academia not so much of competition and ratings but of unsettling exploration. A plea for space within academia open for the individual and collective vulnerabilities of those engaged in its institutions. A video essay practice of unsettling embodied research that allows the personal and the theoretical, the historical and the experimental to mingle and cross could play an essential role in this project.

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On Academic Filmmaking as a "Messy" Methodology

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Abstract

How would you make a documentary, stranded in your house, in the middle of a global pandemic? What happens to your project, and what happens to the filmmaker-researcher?

On the eve of the global Covid-19 pandemic, I returned from Melbourne to Istanbul to begin filming the documentary which is the practical side of my Ph.D. project on the filmmaking methodologies of contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey. When the outbreak of the pandemic locked the world inside their houses, I turned *my* house into a studio and started using things I found in the house as my equipment, such as the projector, phones, and books as tripods. My friend turned into a cinematographer, and we learned how to use a 4K video recorder from YouTube tutorials. We filmed the live interviews with the female filmmakers that took place over Skype. The film ended up reflecting the experience of making a film under the pandemic conditions. In this article, I will attempt to think through my filmmaking process and understand "mess" as an experimental approach that works even in an academic context.

Keywords: Academic Filmmaking, *Dream Workers*, Messy Methodology, Unmet Possibility, Coincidentality

Mess: A Rebellious Methodology

Modern-day academy is demanding. It demands timely submissions, meeting deadlines, keeping up with schedules, and making thorough plans. It necessitates the academics to follow a pre-determined, tangible path leading them directly to the gaps that are supposed to be filled by the expected outcomes. But being a filmmaker/scholar and deriving knowledge from the filmmaking practice challenges these academic assumptions because the unpredictability of artistic practice and the coincidentality of documentary-making process may turn the process into a "mess." And the knowledge produced through an artistic practice can be born out of this mess. Knowledge might not come from a smooth, white, predictable path but from a life-like process. Often complex, painful, and playful... That is why in this article, I aim to think about how these two terms, academy and filmmaking, function together. How do the demands of the academy get along with the unpredictability of artistic practice? And how does bringing knowledge to life out of such a "messy" process pose a challenge to the traditions of the academy?

I would like to think about these questions through my "messy" Ph.D. story. Using documentary filmmaking as my main mode of inquiry, I designed a creative practice-based doctoral project. Within this project, my aim was to understand the filmmaking methodologies of contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey. I chose to work on this topic because, for the first time in the history of cinema, Turkey witnesses a generation of female directors who create a distinct cinema with feminist aesthetics and concerns despite misogynistic cultural and social dynamics and authoritarianism. To explore women's film culture in Turkey, I wrote an exegesis and produced a feature-length documentary film *Dream Workers* (Fontini 2022). In the written part of my research, I identified the new production methods and stylistic approaches used by contemporary female directors from Turkey in relation to sociopolitical and cultural dynamics and theorised these features under the term "Women's New Cinema." The exegesis discusses the particularities of Women's New Cinema through the filmmaking practices of seven directors who were interviewed for the documentary film

Dream Workers. Choosing documentary as the methodology enabled the research to reflect the narratives and experiences of featured directors in their own voices. In producing the documentary, I also became one of the filmmakers who contributed to women's film culture. The exegesis also examines this reflexivity by discussing my own filmmaking experience.

Figure 1: The poster of *Dream Workers*

Using lived experiences to build theoretical discussions of a Ph.D. project was a decision to follow an unusual path. This approach contradicts the "intellectual tradition" which assumes that "something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life" (Ahmed 2017, 10). Rather than pulling theory away from life, my research aimed to bring theory "closer to skin" (ibid.). While conceptualising this in my Ph.D. exegesis, the work of Sara Ahmed and Katherine McKittrick was useful. Not only do they suggest that "the personal is theoretical" (ibid.) but they also define "story" as "theoretical" (McKittrick 2021, 8). The Black ways of knowing (2021, 3) enabled me to formulate a rationale that understands "imagination" as "necessary to analytical curiosity and study" (2021, 8). By constructing academic knowledge from stories narrated in the documentary, my doctoral project intervened in the traditional academic expectation.

Placing "personal" story at the core of my research, I also wanted to challenge the idea that when it is *his* story, it easily becomes History but when it is *our* story, i.e., queers, women, Blacks, Muslims, etc., it always stays as a personal story. I aimed to contribute to history through our "personal" stories. Remaining "agnostic", trusting the "journey", and constructing the "academic" knowledge from the resonances of the personal stories that are shared by the participants might have ended up with "messy" consequences. As Tim Bond and Dione Mifsud say:

> [W]ho decides what may be disclosed about whom? What is restricted information and only disclosed outside the formal exchange, as it were off the record? These are fa-

> miliar problems in any qualitative research. However the nature of the narrative process means that concerns of this type may be difficult to anticipate in advance and may only become issues as they arise. (2006, 250)

By acknowledging the unpredictability of a filmmaking process, I opened the research to *possibility* rather than fixing it with predetermined outcomes. Adopting this rebellious approach, I accepted "mess" as a scientifically creative methodology.

Experience the Experience of Making a Film

Before the production process started, I was thinking mess as an intellectually non-traditional way of making a film. Similar to the Black method (McKittrick 2021, 5) which demands "openness," I formulated this innovative approach as "unsatisfied with questions that result in descriptive-data-induced answers" (ibid.). But during the production process, I understood that mess is not only an analytical frame but also how one chooses to live life. As well as being a way of knowing, it is a livingness that is sustained by the erotic (see Lorde 1984), wonder (see McKittrick 2021, 6), and coincidence. Mess is not an untidy, confused state but a "profoundly creative source" (Lorde 1984, 91), a "desire to know" (McKittrick 2021, 5) and a detailed curiosity open to the unmet possibility and surprise. I would like to explain these observations through my production story which also tells how "mess as methodology" on paper became my way of living life.

In early 2020, I returned from Melbourne to Istanbul to start filming the documentary production. My initial plan for the production of the documentary was to record the interviews with the contemporary female directors at the Atlas Theatre in Istanbul and travel in Turkey to visit locations of the films made by the female filmmakers. However, the Cultural Ministry decided to close Atlas Theatre down to open a new theatre there. Welcoming this coincidence into the documentary, I decided to film the about-to-be-gentrified Atlas Theatre. I wanted to depict how my filmmaking process was affected by the cultural politics of the current government even before the production started. I started filming the closure of the theatre while searching for an alternative place for the interviews. That was when the pandemic broke out.

The lockdowns followed the outbreak of the pandemic shortly after, forcing me to reconsider my production methods again. Not being allowed to go out, I turned my house into a studio so that I could record Skype interviews between myself and the participants. In preparation for the production, the cinematographer Nalan Abbasoğlu and I arranged new equipment such as a projector, phones, tripods, and a gimble. We learned how to use Filmic Pro, a 4K video recorder for mobile phones. After many trials at home, we decided on how to best position the lights and phones to film the interviews. As the phones were recording for trial purposes, I ended up having footage showing the pre-production stage. These recordings have since become a part of the final documentary *Dream Workers*. This is how the documentary started thriving: by remaining agnostic and trusting the journey. Out of a "personal" and "messy" process, the academic knowledge started to emerge.

Figure 2: Arranging the lighting in my house, image from *Dream Workers*

Figure 3: Arranging the living room for the interviews, image from *Dream Workers*

The unpredictability of the filmmaking process took me out of the "normal," expected, arranged ways of production. The instability of the filmmaking process led the crew and I to find alternative ways to make a film. The live interviews did not take place in person but over Skype. They were projected onto a wall through a projector which was then recorded by the cinematographer. While recording the interviews, I was trapped in the house because of the constant curfews. But I continued making the film. I filmed myself stranded in the house, spending my days under the curfew. Instead of pushing rigid plans to find answers to my research questions, I

decided to experience the process. Rather than expecting the "right" things to happen, I started approaching the process with curiosity and wonder. I ended up making a film that not only narrates the stories of women filmmakers from Turkey, but which also depicts how a contemporary female director from Turkey (me) makes her film under the misogynistic social and political atmosphere and pandemic conditions.

Involving the filmmaking process in the documentary was not part of the initial plan. However, I ended up involving the story of the filmmaking process and my personal story. During the post-production stage, I watched the footage in which I was having intimate conversations with the female filmmaker participants and cinematographer. I watched all of us sharing many details related to our personal and professional lives. It was during this phase of production that my questioning started: "Should I also include my story?", "Do I feel safe enough to unfold my unhappy childhood and my reflections about myself within the documentary?" But how could I present all the personal and quite sincere stories told by the participants, and hide my own story? As argued by Michael Renov, the subjective is "the filter through which the Real enters discourse" (1999, 88). That is why I decided my reality should enter the film; by sharing details of my life and being vulnerable, I claimed my own voice, gave up the power I was holding as the filmmaker, and became more equal to the participating filmmakers.

Involving the subjective or being reflexive is not a new approach to documentary filmmaking. Filmmakers started including autobiographical details in the film and making first-person documentaries in the 1970s and 80s. In alignment with the cultural climate of the period in the West, "a range of 'personal' issues—namely, race, sexuality, and ethnicity—became consciously politicised" (Renov 1999, 89). In response to this, documentary-makers started enacting their "fluid, multiple, even contradictory" identities within their films (1999, 90, 91). Female filmmakers such as Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Alina Marazzi and Margot Nash are a few examples revealing what it means to be an embodied and perceiving person within their documentaries. However, my journey was slightly different from these filmmakers. It was not part of the initial plan but due to the unpredictability of the filmmaking process, I ended up

sharing my personal story with the audience. It was the coincidentiality and limitations that triggered my creativity.

Limitation as a Creative Strategy

During the editing stage, I entered a new messy phase which led me toward more possibilities and surprising collaborations. I was planning to use the facilities of the university to edit the documentary but as Australia implemented strict border policies during the pandemic, I got stranded in Turkey for two years. So, the little budget I had was mostly spent on the editing of the documentary. Whilst these financial limitations shaped my production process, we worked in solidarity. Being aware of my financial limitations, Nalan Abbasoğlu the cinematographer, and Angie Black the post-production supervisor volunteered their time working on the project. Participants gave consent for me to use the interviews and parts of their films in the documentary and for promotional activities foregoing copyright fees. I met Sertaç Toksöz and Yalın Özgencil, the owners of Postbıyık (an Istanbul post-production company), who also applied colour correction and sound design to *Dream Workers*. They provided the film with post-production support.

Little by little, the scenes started coming together. However, the initial feedback I received on an early cut of *Dream Workers* suggested depicting a "certain" type of female existence that represents typical Eastern femininity. As a scholar working on an Eastern context at a Western institution, I was aware of such expectations. It was my conscious choice not to create a victim or a hero or a "heroic victim" (see Winston 2009, 46) out of the women from Turkey. In *Dream Workers*, the viewer watches "ordinary" conversations between filmmakers, all of whom come from the same world. Telling the stories of women artists producing under an authoritarian regime in my Ph.D. film, I was sensitive not to produce victimised Eastern femininity for the consumption of a Western audience. As "Islamic women of the Middle East are typically seen as victims of religion, patriarchy, tradition, and poverty in the West, women artists from the same region are expected to testify to this presumed condition" (Amireh and Majaj quoted in Suner 2007, 65–66). I was careful not to create binaries such as us/them, gender liberated/enslaved, developed/underdeveloped, civilised/primitive.

In her brilliant work, *Kill the Documentary*, Jill Godmilow talks about this division in a detailed way. If the person depicted is "commodified, circulated, and consumed without regard to its original status as a person", Godmilow calls it "pornography of the real" (2022, 1). The film's aim in this instance is "to entertain its audience; to produce fascination with its materials; to achieve closure; to satisfy, and to assure the audience of informed and moral citizenship" (2022, 3). But there is another way of filmmaking awakening us from this hegemonic way of thinking. Jill Godmilow explores this alternative filmmaking mode through the notion of "speaking nearby" developed by Trinh T. Minh-ha:

> [Speaking nearby] requires that you deliberately suspend meaning, preventing it from merely closing and hence leaving a gap in the formation process. This allows the other person to come in and fill that space as they wish. Such an approach gives freedom to both sides and this may account for it being taken up by filmmakers who recognize in it a strong ethical stance. By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies in knowledge. (2018)

This approach promotes a more equal mode of engagement, offering an equal space where the director avoids naming, inspecting, and defining— she just watches and records (Godmilow 2022, 95). Not only the production but also the editing process of *Dream Workers* made me come back to Minh-ha's "gap." And here comes another part of my messy production story. During the editing process, I worked with two different editors but we were unable to work together due to the constant curfews. What I was imagining in my mind was manifesting itself in their rough cut as "the pornography of reality." The editors were sending me the footage that was trying so hard to elevate the emotions of the audience. The edited scenes depicted how dramatic the situation of women in Turkey is under the male-dominated sociocultural order. After being unable to work with either of them, I ended up becoming the editor of *Dream Workers*. While editing it, I tried to avoid making an "us-watching-them"

documentary in which the audience watches ethnographically interesting subjects. Leading an "anti-academic" filmmaking process, I was determined *not* to produce knowable Eastern womanhood for the consumption of the audience.

I did it by ensuring the participants' involvement in the editing process which allowed them to come in and fill the "gap" as they wished. I tried to capture the actualities of the filmmakers by interviewing them but images can still be selected and manipulated in the editing stage (Winston 2009, 15). As mentioned by Bill Nichols, in the encounter between the director and the participant, something is at risk (2017, 112). The filmmaker entering the world of its participants "has the power to alter [that] world" (2017, 112). That is why I decided to involve the filmmakers in every stage of meaning production: I wanted us to "create" the "actuality" together. The participant filmmakers watched the intended-edited versions of the documentary, which part of the interviews should be included was negotiated and their input shaped the final film's structure and meaning. This promoted their agency and foregrounded our relationship as a site of "negotiated power" (see Walker and Waldman 1999, 13-19). After we all agreed on the final version, I locked the picture and the post-production stage started. This gave the participants power over their representation which moved the research from traditional ethnographic objectivity to an "informed intersubjectivity" stemming from listening and collaboration (McBeth 1993, 146, 161).

Dream Workers, an Experiential Journey

The pursuit of making *Dream Workers* during a global pandemic allowed the rhythm of life and experience to create the narrative. I had to follow an unknown path and experience the flow of the film as I was unable to follow the decisions made during the pre-production stage. The messy process might have made me end up with messy consequences, but a couple of months after its completion, *Dream Workers* screened at the 29th International Adana Golden Boll Film Festival (2022) and the 15th Documentarist "Which Human Rights?" Film Festival (2022).

Figure 4: *Dream Workers* at 29th International Adana Golden Boll Film Festival

Figure 5: 15th Documentarist Film Festival. The cinematographer Nalan Abbasoğlu and I answer the questions from the audience

Days before the screening of the film, I started worrying about how the narrative would be understood. I was preoccupied with being "misunderstood." It was an academic anxiety; I was still expecting the audience to understand the "right" things. Several months after experiencing the screening stage, I understand one thing better: the meaning of the film does not only depend on the director and her intentions but also on the experience of the audience. As noted by Jacques Rancière, "Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity" (2009, 17). As spectators link what they see to what they have seen, said, done and dreamed (ibid.), they might understand things the director does not intend them to or they might not understand the things she wants them to. In this sense, being "misunderstood" is a part of the process. Misunderstanding some things might even be better than understanding the "right" things.

Expecting the audience to understand the right things separates them "from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (Rancière 2009, 2). This is an academic concern: to give the right answer, to tell the audience what to think, and how to feel. In this understanding, the director makes a film to teach the audience, to activate them, to "wake them up" from a dream, and to "save" them from the world of fantasy. In this story, knowledge flows from the director to the audience, from the one who knows to the one who is expected to learn –this is a "logic of straight, uniform transmission" (Rancière 2009, 14). However, a story only finds its meaning upon meeting another story (2009, 22). Just like the artist, the spectator selects, compares, and acts by interpreting. She relates what she sees to other things she sees in other scenes, in other places. She cre-

ates her own poem with the letters of the poem standing in front of her (2009, 13).

Now it is clear to me that filmmaking is not one-way communication from the filmmaker to the audience, it is not like a scholar lecturing her students in silence. It is a sharing. Sharing disrupts the contemporary principles of knowledge production. It is "capacious" and "crosses boundaries" (McKittrick quoted in Keith 2023, 1). It disrupts the hierarchical structure built by "giving and receiving" which reproduces the neoliberal values of the institution. Producing knowledge out of an artistic production, in this sense, is an intervention.

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Professor-artist *and* professor-researcher

Making the case for experimental filmmaking as research in the academic context of Ecuador's Universidad de las Artes

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Abstract

The foundation of the Universidad de las Artes inaugurated access to a public education in arts in Ecuador in 2015. As three professor-artist-researchers who have worked in different periods in this institution, we propose an article with two objectives in mind. First, we aim to share and examine the film-based artistic work that has formed part of our research practice within the university setting (and the experience of making these films in this particular context), including the experimental ethnographic documentary short *Sour Lake* (Dávila, 2019), the found footage essay film *1922* (Gills, 2023),

and the expansive imagework design *Dispositivo ORG* (Terán Vargas, 2017-2024). Secondly, based on these experiences, we propose to discuss more broadly the entanglements of the professor-artist-researcher role (including how our artistic practice and research interweave with our teaching practice) and to reflect on the potential advantages of experimental filmmaking in the academic context.

Keywords: experimental ethnography, essay film, found footage, image-work, teaching methods

Introduction

Since its establishment in 2015, the Universidad de las Artes in Ecuador has emerged as a center for transdisciplinary artistic education in the region. As three filmmakers and researchers who have taught at this University, we write this article to share the experience of filmmaking in this particular academic environment and the ways in which our filmmaking has intersected other areas of our academic work, including research and teaching.

In this article, we present three case studies: the experimental ethnographic film *Sour Lake* (Andrés Dávila, 2019), the video essay and found footage film *1922* (Libertad Gills, 2023), and the *image-work* film *Dispositivo-Org* (Carlos Terán Vargas, 2017-2024), all developed as research projects at the Universidad de las Artes. These films, through different formal approaches, manage to establish a dialogue with teaching practices and research within the academy. These works share a deep proximity to experimental cinema and challenge in multiple ways the normative paradigms of industrial filmmaking prevalent in film and visual arts schools in our region, through the exploration of a series of plastic, sensorial and critical cinematographic proposals. In sharing these three research-creation projects resulting from our work as scholar-practitioners with a broader audience, we hope to bring attention to possibilities for diverse methodologies of experimental filmmaking in the academic world.

Andrés Dávila — Sour Lake: Experimental Ethnography as Research

In the 1960s, Texaco named a small town in the Ecuadorian jungle "Lago Agrio", in reference to Sour Lake, the Texas town where the oil company was born. This name serves as framework for the crea-

tion of *Sour Lake*, an experimental documentary filmed in the surroundings of Lago Agrio in the Ecuadorian Amazon region and in the Sibundoy Valley of the Colombian Andes. Over the centuries, these geographically, culturally, and commercially interconnected places have faced numerous ecological, social, and territorial issues, the origins of which date back to the 16th century, when the Spanish conquistadors explored them in search of El Dorado. At the beginning of the 20th century, the civilizing processes in the Andean and Amazonian territories bordering Colombia and Ecuador, carried out by both the Spanish religious missions and the Peruvian rubber companies, were parallel to the global expansion of capitalism and its exploration of new territories in different latitudes in search of resources and human labor. In 1967, with the discovery of oil in eastern Ecuador, whose production would begin in 1972, the Texaco company moved to Lago Agrio, affecting and displacing the indigenous ethnic groups and local communities of this territory. In 1992, the Texaco-Chevron oil company withdrew from the Amazon, leaving behind one of the most significant ecological disasters in the world. The environmental impacts still persist in the region. These confluences provide the context for *Sour Lake,* which pose questions about complex relationships between these territories and their inhabitants.

Throughout the making of *Sour Lake*, I encountered issues that led me to confront a complex reality and to question preconceived ideas about the representation of the landscape and the indigenous and local communities of these territories in the media and in traditional documentary filmmaking. I was also confronted with issues such as extractivism, social and historical injustice, as well as the ecological consequences of environmental politics. To deal with these issues, my starting point was to adopt an experimental documentary form, utilizing images and sounds from diverse landscapes in lieu of relying on voice-over narration or interviews, as well as opting for a non-linear montage, thus breaking with a traditional causal logic. The objective was to examine the potential of the landscape and its sensorial dimension, whether natural or modified by human action, and its various layers of meaning, encouraging a constant interaction between the different spaces and a certain rhythm that would create alterations, confluences and continuous intertwining. In addition, the complex relations present in these ter-

ritories were to be highlighted, as well as the consequences derived from the expansion of agricultural frontiers and industrial exploitation in the Andean-Amazonian territory. My challenge was to convey various forms of environmental memory and resistance to the massive and industrial exploitation of nature, as well as the persistent colonial violence affecting these areas. To achieve this, I focused mainly on recording the landscapes of these territories, where different relationships and power structures, both visible and invisible, converge. Thus, the experimental documentary was intended to reflect on realities that remain hidden and others that have become evident, such as the environmental disaster of Lago Agrio.

Still from *Sour Lake* (Dávila 2019). Forest of the Sibundoy region, Colombia.

Still from *Sour Lake* (Dávila 2019). Oil installation in Lago Agrio, Ecuador.

While engaged in the processes of filming and editing, I was teaching at the Universidad de las Artes, where I was simultaneously fulfilling the role of professor at The Universidad de las Artes, where I was responsible for instructing students in the domaines of experimental filmmaking, editing and film research. Concurrently, I was engaged in the writing of my doctoral thesis on contemporary ethnographic experimental cinema. The integration of these three areas of activity—teaching, research and the supervision of final projects—led me to develop a reflexive approach to my creative process, inspired by the theoretical framework of what Catherine Russell calls "experimental ethnography" (1999). This approach re-

views various forms of experimentation with filmic language in the history of ethnographic cinema and expands this term to include other films belonging to experimental cinema, early cinema, found footage, or film essay. Experimental ethnography revises the conventions and formal resources of positivist modes of scientific research and commercial exploitation cinema, and aims to generate a debate on ethical questions about the representation and objectification of the other (Russell 1990, 10). Thus, I have integrated a series of aesthetic, poetic, reflexive, and critical approaches derived from experimental ethnography into my work as a teacher-researcher. These approaches led me to consider ethical questions related to the objectification of the Other and the division between the filmmaker, the audience, and the subjects of ethnography (Minh-ha 1991, 35). To transcend this paradigm, my approach was based on a more fluid conception in which "speaking nearby", rather than "speaking about" allows one to approach the Other without appropriating his or her discourse and without objectifying him or her (Chen and Minh-ha 1992, 87). Both the formal treatment close to experimental ethnography, considered by Russell as a way of "[...] rethinking both aesthetics *and* cultural representation" (Russell 1999, xi), and this "speaking nearby" constituted a challenge and a starting point, as well as an attitude of constant approach and reflection in the process of making this film.

My role as a teacher, researcher, and filmmaker during the production of *Sour Lake* allowed me to advocate for the integration of other pedagogical perspectives and establish new dynamics in my role as researcher-teacher. This was accomplished, for instance, through the incorporation of topics such as experiential ethnography, autoethnography and appropriation of institutional archives into my classes, along with the development of practical exercises derived from the discussions that emerged during these classes. A number of these exercises and some of the graduate work around these themes were later published in a magazine issue "Autoetnografías, archivos y apropiaciones" (2022), which I co-edited in collaboration with Alejandra Carvajal, a student of the Film School. On the other hand, *Sour Lake* afforded the opportunity to examine the transition from conceptual to artistic creation in the field of ethnographic experimental cinema and to comprehend cinema beyond a restrictive framework, which is inevitably linked to processes of ob-

jectification and domination. These distinct modes of experimental ethnographic practice were groundbreaking in the context of teaching at the Film School of the Universidad de las Artes, as they enabled students to discern the techniques of representation and discourses utilized to portray their social and political milieu in film. Moreover, they facilitated an examination of identity, cultural and familial memory and the history of oppression and resistance within their own context through a critical lens. In this way, possibilities opened up for me, both in my artistic practice and as a researcher-teacher, to address more diverse aesthetic and political questions and to explore other formal and descriptive approaches.

Libertad Gills 1922: Video Essay and Found Footage Film as Research

On 15 November 1922, after two weeks of the largest worker's strike in the country, hundreds or thousands of workers were killed in Guayaquil, Ecuador, by the military and police, and countless bodies were thrown in the river Guayas. As the centenary of this historical moment was approaching (with conditions that were strangely similar to those in 1922, like a global pandemic and mass uprisings in the main cities of Ecuador), I began to inquire about this event and ask myself how to think cinematically about it. Furthermore, how to make a video essay or essay film about an event for which no moving images exist? This became a videographic challenge.

I began collecting audiovisual materials in search of a possible solution to the problem of an absence of images through the constitution of an alternative audiovisual landscape. The main source I turned to was the silent film *Fiestas del centenario*, produced by the Ecuadorian film company Ambos Mundos and preserved by the National Film Archive (Cinemateca Nacional del Ecuador), and filmed only a few months before the strike and massacre. The film is Ecuador's only surviving audiovisual archive from 1922 (found only a couple of years ago in France and digitized in 2K) and this in itself became an important inspiration for the project. Secondly, I incorporated images of protests in Ecuador in 2021 and 2022 about many of the same issues that motivated the protests in 1922, principally worker's rights and a decent wage. As I watched and recorded these videos off of my screen, I wondered what would become of these images in one hundred years. Finally, I also decided to in-

clude international films made in 1922 which would be useful for understanding what cinema was in the world in that year: what were the innovations and what were the repeated subject matters across international cinema? As my thoughts moved between the past and the present, between film history and film practice, between National archives found in Europe and images of protests shot on low quality phone cameras and posted to social media, and between what cinema was in Ecuador and what it was in the world, editing became a way to bridge the historical/geographical/technological gap, attributing elements of the present to the past (and vice versa), as well as breaking down national borders.

Rewatching *Fiestas del centenario* from the historical perspective of knowing that only a few months later the massacre would occur allowed me to see the images in a new way. When President Tamayo appeared – the same president who gave the order for the massacre in November – I paused the film on my computer screen and took a closer look. I suspended this shot, reducing its speed eventually to 20%, engaging in what Laura Mulvey calls "delaying cinema" (2006, 144). Suddenly, I could see gestures in his expression that before had been invisible to the eye. The archive slowly began *opening up to me*, allowing me to experience first-hand what I had discovered in the work of Susana de Sousa Dias, whose films made with Portugal's International and State Defense Police (PIDE) archives explore the very act of looking as research. As I watched this brief shot of Tamayo over and over again, expanding the duration through cinema's toolkit, ideas began to form in my attention to the "small gestures" (Álvarez-López 2014): How was it that this 100-year-old image was available in a restored 2K digital archive, while images that I was recording off my screen from protests occurring at this moment were already digitally degraded and glitched? Worker's strikes from 1922 and 2022 for decent wages were suddenly recontextualized within a larger aesthetic question of rich versus poor images. Hito Steyerl's concept of *poor images* (2009) accompanied my gaze, allowing me to understand the power precisely in their precarity. In placing these images side by side, associations and contrasts began to take place, gaining power in the montage.

Making *1922* allowed me to connect and develop my doctoral research with my artistic practice. This, in turn, also poured into my teaching, as I engaged students in the video essay format as a tool

Still from *1922* (Gills 2023). President Tamayo in *Fiestas del Centenario* (Ambos Mundos, 1922).

Still from *1922* (Gills 2023). Worker's strike in 2022.

for film criticism. One student from my videographic criticism course later reflected on "the discovery of being able to articulate ideas on cinema with images instead of words", while another commented on how "films are composed of images that attract one another, acting like magnets", leading her to think "not only on the images that we see, but also on those that we do not see, of what is left out so that the spectator can imagine them". Observing how students responded to the video essay reinforced my understanding of this mode of production as an example of what Barbara Bolt calls "material thinking" (2006), that is, the way in which the audiovisual materials have "their own intelligence that come[s] into play with the artist's creative intelligence" (1). By zooming into images, pausing to look at particular frames, and altering the original duration of sequences, for example, artist-researchers are able to open images as sites of knowledge that can challenge, make visible, and respond to neglected archives and other forms of censorship. I was able to experience this firsthand.

The video essay, both in my own practice and in the classroom, allowed for an experience of "listening to images" (Campt 2017) that I had so fortunately observed in the experimental films I studied. This, in turn, made my research and parallel dissertation writing even more persuasive and focused. In other words, my research poured into my artistic and teaching practice and then back into my

writing process, in a mutually beneficial relationship between academic work and filmmaking.

Carlos Terán Vargas

Dispositivo-Org: Image-work as Research

Characterized by experimental cinema conventions, tinged with science fiction and closely linked to the melodramatic elements of Latin American cinema, the extensive three-hour film *ORG* (Fernando Birri 1967-1978) has rarely been screened since its debut. While its narrative is inspired by an ancient Indian myth adapted by Thomas Mann in 1940, its primary importance lies in its experimental nature, with more than 26,000 cuts and around 700 audio channels. There are two existing versions of the film. A first version that meets the director's criteria with a duration of 177 min (which has been the basis for this research) and a shorter second version that arose from the legal demands of the actor-producer Mario Girotti (Terence Hill).

The film *Dispositivo-Org* becomes a tool for studying and researching a film like *ORG*, delving into appropriation, intervention and ethnographic critique of the image. My practice is rooted in visual anthropology and influenced by the 1980s crisis of representation which prompted introspection and the reevaluation of concepts, practices, and representations within the discipline. My research emerges from the reflection on the poetic dimension in ethnography, as proposed in James Clifford and George Marcus' *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), and from the concept of "artwriting" as a visual ethnographic tool for interdisciplinary dynamics between art and anthropology, as proposed in *The Traffic in Art and Culture* (Marcus and Fred R. Mayers, 1995). In this way, *Dispositivo-Org* is a film resulting from research on fieldwork methodologies on the moving image. This pursuit is positioned from the concept of "image work," an "intermedial ethos" (Andrade and Elhaik 2018, 3-11) under which it is considered that researching images involves producing images. Thus, the interaction between *ORG* and the image work film *Dispositivo-Org* is established as a result of this research process, allowing an analysis of the tensions between cinema, ethnographic fieldwork, and image research methodologies.

In *Dispositivo-Org*, I set out to recontextualize image theory and research methodologies to delve deeper into contemporary audio-

Still from *Dispositivo-Org* (Terán Vargas 2024). Visual intervention on archival film using Lomokino technique.

Still from *Dispositivo-Org* (Terán Vargas 2024) Visual intervention on interview with Fernando Birri.

visual techniques and narratives with undergraduate students. This effort aims not only to enrich academic dialogue (between students and professor) but also to catalyze an intergenerational dialogue on the use of cinema as a qualitative research methodology and as a tool for socio-scientific exploration. Guided by the concept of "ethnographic authority," I develop montages of visual and auditory elements that offer new perspectives on visual narratives. By meticulously exploring image treatment and narrative construction, as a class, we aimed to uncover storytelling techniques that challenge traditional cinematic discourse. This analytical journey adhered to the principles of Fernando Birri and Settimio Presutto, where experimentation is central, stemming from the ideology and politics of filmmaking.

To unravel the structure of image and sound representation in *ORG*, I conducted numerous comparative screenings between the two existing versions. In this process, the concept of image-work gained relevance. During this phase, students were profoundly involved in a playful engagement with *ORG* images (archives) that would culminate in the film project *Dispositivo-Org*. Student participation was not limited to the mere digitization of 35mm materials: it expanded into a meticulous process of systematization and creative intervention within the collected archives. The role of the students was critical in the management of the Lomokino records (a camera that allows the recording of short sequences in 35 mm),

ensuring that their conversion from analog to digital retained the essence of the original work. This rich process allowed the students to immerse themselves in the practice of creating an image-work film that went beyond simple documentation. It evolved into a dynamic methodological instrument within their visual interest. This deep involvement extended beyond digital conversion of archival materials to include creative reinterpretations and systematic analysis, fostering a dynamic environment where students critically engaged with both visual and auditory elements. This process nurtured a space for spontaneous, intersubjective dialogue and moved us away from rigid control, allowing us to explore the authentic unpredictability of artistic creation.

Fieldwork, when grounded in an artistic practice, provides a unique platform to contemplate the inherent power dynamics of imagery, allowing for a profound reflection on ethnographic authority, not merely as a domain of representation but also as a sphere of research and creation. *Dispositivo-Org* epistemically resonates with Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of "speaking nearby", mentioned by Dávila above. Simultaneously, it probes the intricacies of image thought, echoing the sentiments of "listening to images" and "material thinking" mentioned by Gills. Within this framework, the act of montage emerges as a curatorial endeavor, forging an ever-evolving dialogue, shaped by representation, between the researcher and the intermedial ethos of a cinematic *image-work* called *film*.

Conclusions

In this article, we share our experiences as educators, artists, and researchers during the process of creating three experimental films at Universidad de las Artes from 2019 to 2024. Through these works we demonstrate experimental cinema's capacity to merge artistic and academic worlds. The merits of such experimental approaches in academia can be summarized in three core areas: the deconstruction and reinterpretation of history, the innovation of film production methods, and the development of new or alternative pedagogical strategies.

Experimental cinema encourages a re-examination of historical representation, prompting us to view archives as dynamic memories open to reinterpretation. In all three works, historical events and archives were re-envisioned through ethnography, the video

essay, and image-work, thereby enabling students to engage with history and cinema as malleable mediums. This approach demystifies traditional academic perspectives, particularly within film schools, where history and archives are often presented as fixed and unchangeable. Furthermore, our foray into experimental cinema allowed us to critique and deviate from standardized production models. If constrained by the national film funding's rigid guidelines, our films may never have come to fruition. The university environment, however, motivated us to work beyond these confines, liberating us from the conventional pre-production, production, and post-production cycle. For instance, the film *1922*, which is made completely in what would typically be called "post-production", exemplifies the incompatibility of such creative projects with standard industry practices.

Lastly, the application of experimental methods in the academic context has opened doors to innovative teaching methods. Our experiences as filmmakers have enriched our pedagogical approaches, cultivating a reciprocal relationship between teaching, research and creative practice. These approaches—including ethnography, the video essay, and image work—challenge conventional narrative and stylistic norms, thus enhancing film education by promoting critical thinking and reflective learning. This exploration of experimental cinema within the academic context underscores its value as an educational tool, a creative outlet, and a source of methodological innovation. Our findings suggest that the integration of experimental cinema in academic settings can disrupt traditional educational models and offer a refreshing perspective on filmmaking and teaching in the arts.

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Making Space for Film with Film Geographies

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Abstract

In this article I will argue that the online filmmaking and screening initiative Film Geographies is shaping (and has been shaped by) our understanding of what a geographical film is. It has achieved this by opening up a previously unavailable space for geographers to make and screen films allowing the creation and curation of a growing archive of work that is a significant contribution not just to filmic geographies as a sub field but to the discipline more widely. Film Geographies was established in 2016 as an online digital platform for the making and screening of films by geographers and/or about geography. In the last eight years it has amassed an archive of over 200 short films and over 1200 subscribers from around the world. Film Geographies also collaborates with other disciplines with joint calls highlighting the importance of building networks for film practitioners and researchers within and without the academy. The mostly short films are collected via two annual calls attached to major geography conferences. The online platform screens film online and in cinemas and organises filmmaking training workshops. I argue that the origins of the platform on the margins of the discipline, and diverse elements of the Film Geographies

platform, have created much needed accessible film space for geographers to make films, watch films and debate film and filmmaking, enabling participants to shape and influence a range of film-focused and practice-led contributions to the discipline.

Keywords: Filmic geographies, inclusivity, film as method, place-based filmmaking, filmspace

Introduction

Progress in academic filmmaking has been uneven across the disciplines. Unlike anthropology, with its long history of ethnographic and observational filmmaking (de Brigard 1975; MacDougall 1985; Pink 2001, 2012; Grimshaw 2001, 2005) or even sociology's use of audiovisual technology as a mode of (mass) observation (Casey et al. 2014; Hamilton 2006), the discipline of geography cannot draw on a long history of academic filmmaking. This has made a definition of geographical film harder to discern. It is only in the last decade or so that a sufficient number of films have been produced to allow scholars to more easily assess what a geographical film is, or might be, and what makes a film geographical.

In this article I will begin by giving a short history of filmmaking in geography, before going on to developments in the last decade, focusing on the impact of the establishment of filmgeographies.com as an online platform for debate and dissemination of geographical films. Looking back at the way the Film Geographies has developed, I will argue that it is creating a multi-layered film space that makes two significant spatiotemporal contributions to the field of film geography. Firstly, though the way it has provided an annualised and globalised mapping of geographical films, a dynamic and iterative space where films are produced, submitted and screened, allowing scholars and filmmakers to debate film and filmmaking in real time. Secondly, through its collection over the last eight years (and counting) of a significant archive of films, it is creating a historicised film space with content that it is now possible for scholars to map, track and analyse. I will also argue that Film Geographies has created a particular kind of radical film space, shaped by a previous resistance to the assimilation of filmmaking, that is defining a notion of what makes a geographical film for the discipline.

Geography and Filmmaking

Geography has always relied on visualization tools in its production of knowledge but has no clear heritage in the realm of filmmaking. Filmmaking could easily have been added to the toolbox as it was in other disciplines. *Climbing Mount Everest* (Noel 1922) is generally acknowledged to be the first geographical 'expeditionary' film. The film documented the first British ascent of the peak by Captain John Noel in the same year as *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty 1922), credited with being the first anthropological film and also one of the first films to define the documentary genre. Despite this early use of film to document explorer expeditions in the early 20th century, geography did not go on to develop a culture of filmmaking.

The establishment of a notion of a 'filmic geography' has been hampered by the belief that it is the core role of geographers to write about films and filmmaking in the context of space, place and visuality, but not to make them (Jacobs 2013, 2016a). The 'cultural turn' of the discipline in the 1980s created the first significant opportunity to examine the role of film and television production, heavily influenced by Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Mulvey's work on the gaze (1975). In the following decades geographers went on to explore a gaze that was colonial/sovereign (Gregory 1994), touristic (Urry 2001), or academic (Crang 1997). But when geographers turned their attention to film, calling it a 'new subfield' (Lukinbeal and Zimmerman 2006), their approach was largely focused on writing about television and cinema in the context of landscape (Aitken and Zonn 1994; Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997; Lukinbeal and Zimmerman 2006), thereby setting out limits to the rise of a filmic geography at the exact time they were proclaiming its arrival. When Aitken and Dixon (2006) stated that geography's relationship with film had 'come of age', the idea of a 'film geography' was still largely one where film was analysed and written about, not practised.

It's possible that one impediment to exploring filmmaking processes was related to an oft noted assumption that geography and visuality were indivisible (Driver 2003; Rose 2001, 2022). The discipline was referred to as the 'eye' of history (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988) — why add a camera when an eye was enough? Crang (1997, 359) for example, noted how geographers paid more critical attention to the 'representations of landscape than the prac-

tices that create these representations.' The absence of filmmaking for geography was a missed opportunity not only to add an important methodology to the discipline, but also to examine the spatiality of film, to reflexively explore our dependency on the visual (and aural), and to better understand how geographical research produces and creates knowledge about place and space.

Making Space for Film(ic) Geographies

While not a filmmaker herself, Doreen Massey was one of the few geographers who saw and was attracted to the spatial possibilities of film and filmmaking as a pathway to different kind of thinking space for geography (see Pratt and Jacobs 2018). Film connected theories of representation to politics and space, and Massey was excited by the transformative potential of film as a vehicle to effect meaningful change. It probably helped that she was based at the Open University (OU) for so much of her career (1982-2016), home to BBC TV studios that produced teaching material (Weinbren 2015), so that she was often in front of the camera even if not behind it. In an exchange with Lury published in *Screen* in 1999, Massey ruminated on the possibility of film 'to criticise or reorder our geographical imaginations of the world', suggesting one of the key reasons film could do this was the ability to render visible things that remain unseen in a global context (Lury and Massey 1999, 233). She identified the key spatial characteristics of film that made this possible: "Precisely because of its mobility, its ability to travel, to make new juxtapositions, new cartographies […], film has the potential powerfully to present this other aspect of our spatial world as well" (Lury and Massey 1999). But without a material or conceptual location within the discipline for academic filmmaking to grow and develop, geographers interested in filmmaking had to look outside their discipline for inspiration and training, relying on handbooks and theoretical contributions from those working in film and cinema studies, anthropology and sociology (Dawkins and Wynd 2010; Dancyger 2011; De Jong et al. 2012; Hamilton 2006; Kydd 2011; Knoblauch 2012; Hampe 1996; McClane 2013).

The Film Geographies initiative was created on the edges of the formal academic establishment, not from choice but from necessity. In 1998, around the same time Massey was writing about the transformative potential of film and Gillian Rose was asking how geog-

raphy was visual, I (a prospective PhD student who would be supervised by Doreen Massey in the same OU geography department that Rose would later join) asked the then Head of Department if I could submit my thesis as a film. Or at least part of it. I was told this was possible in theory, but the actual process never materialized and my PhD remained solely a prose text. By 2004, now a post-doctoral fellow, I was able to obtain funding from research councils covering the humanities and social sciences to make films. Yet within my discipline, there was little interest shown and no opportunities to share or discuss films or the process of making a film. One of my films (*Sinai Sun*, 2006) was screened at the anthropological Margaret Mead Travelling Film Festival in 2007, but no such avenues existed in geography.

It wasn't really until the 2010s, when geography took a digital turn (Ash et al. 2018), that the potential of filmmaking gained traction. By then, more geographers were embracing filmmaking methodologies — see Garrett's use of 'videography' (2012), Gallagher on experimental sound (2011), Bliss on digital storytelling (2011), and Parr (2007) on the potential of collaborative filmmaking. With the rise of interest in non-representational theories, Lorimer wrote about the potential of the moving image to explore the 'more-than-human' (2010), while in 2011 Cutler established the film club Passenger Films (Cutler 2012) that until 2017 screened selected films with invited speakers at cinemas and other locations in London, providing a space for geographers to gather and debate key issues using filmic representations as a starting point. Perhaps most influential at that time in the discipline in relation to research methodologies for global development was the growing popularity of participatory video (Kindon et al. 2007; Milne et al. 2012). The first major geographical conference sessions on the rise of filmmaking in the discipline were held at the UK's Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) and the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in 2011. The AAG session in particular garnered interest from feminist and queer filmmaking geographers and geographers from the global South, and several papers were developed into a special edition on the rise of filmmaking in the discipline for the journal *Area* (Baptiste 2015; Collard 2014; Kindon 2015; Jacobs 2016a, 2016b; Vasudevan et al. 2015).

Yet this growth of filmmaking in the discipline risked stalling without a space for both publishing and screening the films that would generate greater visibility and debate. At that time no high-rated journal would accept films unless distilled to a series of photographs as part of a 7000-word text (Jacobs 2013, 2016). With all that (albeit low resolution) audiovisual equipment available at the AAG, it seemed like an international conference would be a good place to start. I had already joined the Media and Communications Specialty Group in 2011 but it took me until 2016 (with my colleague Joseph Palis from the Specialty Group) to work up the courage to ask the conference organisers if they would add 'films' as an option to their paper presentations. They politely declined but said there was nothing to stop us from organising a film session as long as we didn't mind holding it outside of the main conference timetable. From that moment on, nearly all our organising and networking took place outside of formal channels, and was largely unfunded. In the cartography of the discipline our position at the margins of the anglophone centre was made clear. After putting out a call for films on mailing lists, I set up a googledoc system for collating submissions and a website to host the films, registering the domain filmgeographies.com. Other interested geographers came forward and the website was developed with the help of web designer Matteo Bontempi and geographer Giovanna Ceno from Italy. Our first call received over forty-five submissions, many from women and many from beyond North America and Northern Europe.

Making Space for Film Space

Film space has been written about in many different contexts. In '*L'espace au cinéma'* Gardiès (1993) identifies four key spaces of cinema. Two are related to the audience — the physical location of the audience and the 'viewer space' of interpretation — while two are focused on the filmmaking process — 'diegetic' space and narrative space (Lévy 2013).

Referencing Lefevre's *Production of Space* (1991), Massey has argued that space is 'precisely the sphere of the possibility of coming across difference' and 'film is fantastic at portraying this aspect of intense and unexpected juxtaposition, which is a characteristic of space, and of cities in particular' (Lury and Massey 1999, 232). Created on the margins and inspired by the idea of Massey's thinking

about space, Film Geographies approaches its own film space as the product of spatial relations that can occur in a multiplicity of different spaces often at the same time. While we started as an informal initiative, we do now have a small pot of money and a partial formal structure has come through the establishment of a Film Specialty Group at the AAG, with its own constitution and bylaws. We also get funding from Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL), and other sources for screenings and workshops. Elsewhere the development of Film Geographies is still very much embedded in the idea of film space as a political space to affect change, and as an iterative process, relying on the unpaid labour of its supporters and shaped by its dialogical relationship with the filmmakers and films that are submitted. After that it is the format, genre, and method used by the filmmakers who submit their films each year that determines the content of the film space on offer.

Arguably the absence of any pre-established process for filmmaking in the discipline of geography has facilitated some freedom to develop a new set of feminist, decolonial practices and values, which informs our process from putting out calls for films, selecting the films and publishing the films online, and/or screening, as shown in the following outline of the film space of Film Geographies.

Film space is an Inclusive and Accessible Space

Putting out the Call – Establishing our calls through the AAG has helped ensure that Film Geographies has an international reach, though there is more work to be done. While still firmly in the anglophone academy, the AAG is the largest annual conference for geographers worldwide, so it attracts people from all over the world. Co-founder of AAG Shorts and co-chair of the AAG Film Specialty Group Joseph Palis is based in the University of Philippines Diliman, and a significant proportion of our film submissions and subscribers come from the global South. To remove any financial barrier to participation, there is no charge to submit a film or watch a film and there is no requirement to register to attend a conference to have your film screened. Expensive equipment is not necessary, and films made with smartphones are welcome. While geography is an integral part of Film Geographies, the platform actively seeks out interdisciplinary and community collaborations: for example in 2021 we ran a joint call for films with researchers and textile practitioners at

the AHRC funded Stitching Together network to explore the relationship between making textiles and making films.

Faction and Fiction are welcome – Although attitudes are changing, a positivist approach that to produce knowledge as truth, academic films should be documentaries still lingers. Yet while the distinction between documentary and fiction might be a disciplinary or a categorical distinction, it is not ontological. By accepting any format or genre of film, we are encouraging filmmakers to think beyond the idea of film as a document and have amassed a diverse range of filmic styles over the years, including the excellent Nepalese 'coming of age' drama *Kabita* (2019) by Dikshya Karki and Alice Salimbeni's collaborative parody *By Bike She Lives* (2020)

Films not Features- Keep it Brief – There are three main categories — completed shorts, work in progress and student shorts, with a fourth category of 'community-led' film coming in 2024. We ask that films are no more than twenty minutes with an ideal of about five minutes. This is partly for practical reasons – it means we can screen as many films as possible in one ninety-minute session and short films also work better in the classroom and online. By encouraging short films, we are better able to build capacity and work with scholars who might not have a lot of funding or filmmaking experience. The longer the film the harder it is ensure the narrative holds and elements connect, and the more time and money is needed, the more privilege required to make a film happen. The minority of academics who make feature-length films are able to do so because they have reached a level of tenure sufficient to access the funds to pay for production teams to achieve their aims. Making a short film is cheaper and easier, you can use your phone, you don't need tenure or a large grant. The Student Short film by Mark Ball *Pick Up* (2019) tells a fascinating and complex story in under 3 minutes.

Building Capacity through Peer Review – This is a challenge. While traditional peer review takes place during the writing process, nobody wants to change a film once it's gone through full production. We do offer a work in progress review, but it is more likely that our feedback will feed forward into the filmmaker's next films. Our current review panel is largely self-selected and includes academics from geography, sociology and film studies based in the UK, USA, Germany, Italy and the Philippines, as well as people who work in the film industry from the UK and Portugal. The filmmaker answers

three questions: 1. What did you set out to make a film about?; 2. What methods did you choose?; 3. What challenges did you experience? After watching the film reviewers are tasked with assessing: 1. How closely did the filmmaker(s) get to achieving their aims?; 2. Does the style and approach to filmmaking match their objectives?; 3. Should the film be screened? Reviewers are not obliged to only choose films that are technically impressive but can accept a film if they consider it offers some insight into our relationship with the world.

Accessibility and Ownership — Filmmakers who have their films selected need to own the copyright as they are asked for permission to screen their films and host them on the Film Geographies website for a minimum of three years. Selected films are screened in a major US city for the AAG in March or April and in a UK city in late August for the RGS-IBG. At the moment there are no plans to single out films for special awards. Filmmakers are welcome to attend the screening, but it is not considered essential as funds for visas, travel and registration are only available to a minority. When the conference ends the selected films are made available to stream via the Film Geographies website.

Impact, Training and Engagement – Funding from QMUL's Centre for Public Engagement has allowed us to organise public screenings in the UK, US, Egypt and the Philippines. Other online screenings take place without funding, or at the invitation of members from around the world to give seminars or workshops. Different funding bodies including the AAG, the UK Office for Students, Queen Mary Westfield Fund, Centre for Public Engagement and the London Arts and Humanities Partnership have allowed us to offer free 3-5 day filmmaking training workshops (in collaboration with Vitor Hugo Costa at Metafilmes) for staff, students and community organisations.

Conclusion

The establishment of Film Geographies was aimed at creating a space for geographical films. The years of positioning the filmmaking geographer, especially women and scholars of colour, as someone existing on the margins of the discipline has left its mark and constitutes a heritage of the geographical film which has shaped the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches of many films

that we receive. Film Geographies has made a start at mapping out the film spaces that already exist and at offering support to scholars who are looking to create new spaces. Each call for films issued by Film Geographies creates a new collection of films, highlighting how scholars are researching themes such as climate crisis, the housing crisis, migration, war and conflict, racism, feminism, trans justice, decolonisation and social justice. Over time, it is possible to map the changes in focus.

An initial overview of the 200+ films received by Film Geographies shows us how many geographical films have chosen to examine existing inequalities, marginality and outlier status in their choice of subject matter but also in their choice of methodology (Jacobs and Salimbeni 2024). Geographical films look at people's relationship to their environment in an excitingly diverse range of ways, experimenting with different filmic approaches, such as adopting a community-led placed-based filmmaking process (as in the series of award-winning short films exploring the relationship between urban and natural heritage made by made by young residents of Al-Khalifa in Cairo *Urban Dreams* (2021-3)), or reflexively examining the role of the researcher and the representational meanings of film space in their contributions. Notable examples include Neto's *Withering Refuge* (2021), an exploration of researching the experience of refugees living next to mines in Zambia, and Sanogo's *The Lower Main Street Rastaman* (2020), where she uses Glissant's concept of opacity to examine her discomfort in approaching research subjects in South Africa, or Duru's *A Walk Down the Shore* (2018), a narrative tour of different sites of male violence in Istanbul. By looking back at over eight years of film curation at Film Geographies, we can really start to see the multiplicity of stories coming together to produce 'a geography of film that emphasises the relationship of people to place, where landscape is given agency and becomes more than a passive background for human interaction' (Pratt and Jacobs 2018, 286/7).

Making an academic film today is far more likely to be accepted by mainstream geography, as shown by the growing number of articles on film in research practice, some of which have been written by Film Geographies reviewers and filmmakers (Ernwein 2020; Lukinbeal and Sommerlad 2022; Loi and Salimbeni 2022; Roberts 2020; Jacobs and Salimbeni (2024); Thieme et al. 2019). Now that

most journals are online, they are increasingly able and willing to accept films (for example, *Beyond the Text*) or film excerpts and some are even are starting to support production costs. See for example the *Antipode Film Project* (2023). Situated on the margins of the discipline, Film Geographies remains imperfect, underfunded and reliant on unpaid labour. But perhaps the margins have become more central (hooks 1984) and, aided by the digital turn (Ash et al. 2016) as well as the increasing ubiquity of video driven material in higher education, the next years will see the boundaries of the discipline being redrawn to be even more inclusive of filmmaking in the academy

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Investigating Ecocinema through the Video Essay

Videographic Scholarship as an Environmental Media Studies Pedagogy

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Abstract

How can the video essay be deployed as a critical tool to analyse ecocinema and its relevance to the current environmental crisis? The Video Essay for Ecocinema course, held in the 2023 spring semester at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, introduced videographic techniques to investigate the topic of ecocinema and critically analyse ecological imaginaries. A heterogeneous bibliography of texts, films and video essays related to ecocinema presented key thematic concepts, including: visualizations of ecological scale(s); the role of affect in producing environmental consciousness; materialising intangible infrastructures and hidden "grey energies"; and the digital footprint of film and media industries. These concepts in turn served as the basis for a distinct series of videographic exercises that prepared students for their final videographic project. The results demonstrate the profound value of the video essay as a pedagogical practice that can provide students with the

tools to address such a challenging and multifaceted topic as the global environmental crisis.

Keywords: ecocinema, videographic criticism, pedagogy, environmental studies, film

Introduction

Over the past decade, the video essay has proven itself to be a vital component of film scholarship in the digital era, as it combines the twin disciplines of academia and filmmaking into a potent and multifaceted practice: for research, scholarship, publishing and pedagogy (Kiss 2020, 15). While videographic criticism originated in film and media studies, it also represents an exemplary mode of contemporary digital literacy that can be applied to a host of subjects. Video essays allow scholars and students to use the techniques and idioms of audiovisual media production to critically investigate cultural, political and scientific topics, as well as the ways in which these topics are represented in cinema and media. However, despite this enormous potential for the application of video essays, there has been a noticeable scarcity of video essays dealing with environmental topics. The emergence of videographic studies has until now been disassociated with a concurrent emergence of ecocinema over the past decade. As an introduction to the rich catalogue of virtuous examples of ecocriticism in the collection *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2*, Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Seán Cubitt (2022) provide a summary of the current state of the art in ecocinema as follows:

> Cinema has become unthinkable apart from its dependence on mining, electricity generation, and fabrication with their attendant pollution, on global logistical operations and supply chains with massive ecological footprints, on material and technical infrastructures with direct consequences in the physical world, and on the problem of waste.

In an effort to link these two fields of research, the seminar Video Essay Atelier for Econcinema was initiated in the spring semester of 2023 at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio (AAM) in the

Università della Svizzera italiana (USI). Following an initial offering of a video essay seminar at the AAM in 2022, the second iteration posed a question of how videographic criticism could be more deeply aligned with an architectural curriculum. The school offers a series of courses related to landscape and ecology; this, combined with our shared concern for the rising global environmental crisis, led us to imagine how video essays could be a tool to help students make sense of environmental questions to inform their architectural and spatial design practices throughout their careers.

Choosing to delve into the topic of ecocinema has provided us with a fertile ground to interact and enhance our complementary academic profiles. Kevin has been investigating topics in media and image ethics and ecology for several years, broadening his research perspective to question the production and reception of media and its impact on the environment. Through her doctoral thesis and related educational projects, Silvia studies elements of marginality and fragility in border landscapes, observing how cinema and audiovisual media perform as lens and litmus test for the transformation of territories. Integrating videographic practice into the context of an architecture academy enabled us to explore the topic of ecocinema from this dual perspective—examining the environment through film and, conversely, reflecting on the landscape through the cinematic lens. By incorporating videographic practices into our exploration of ecocinema, we investigated how the video essay can be a medium for interdisciplinary analysis, shedding light on the impact of media on the environment and cultivating viewers' ecocritical awareness on cinema. Through an extensive research period we curated a bibliography of texts, films and video essays related to ecocinema that offered sharp positions on key thematic concepts, including: visualizations of ecological scale(s); the role of affect in producing environmental consciousness; materializing intangible infrastructures and hidden "grey energies", understood as the invisible energy consumption and resource extraction upstream of the production processes in question; and the digital footprint of film and media industries. These specific texts are elaborated in the Methodology section.

We also recognized that our students had little to no background in video production. In past video essay workshops with students of varying videographic skill levels, an effective pedagogical model

was adapted from the Middlebury College Videographic Workshop designed by Jason Mittell and Christian Keathley (2023). The Middlebury approach consists of a series of short videographic exercises, each focused on a specific videographic technique to be practiced: editing, voiceover, onscreen text and graphics, and other methods for working with audiovisual material to express critical ideas (Mittell and Keathley 2023). Applying this pre-existing pedagogical method to the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio allowed the introduction of new, theme-specific exercises tailored to ecocinema and the unique skill set of architecture students. We adapted exercises from the Middlebury methods such as the Videographic PechaKucha, Voice-over, and Abstract Trailer, to offer generative approaches for exploring ecological themes in cinema. Additionally, we introduced novel exercises such as the Desktop Exploration and On-Camera Response that enabled students to locate their own subjective engagement in ecocinema research. The following provides a more detailed account of the innovative dimensions of the pedagogical model we devised.

Methodology

With the dual aims to teach both important theoretical concepts for ecocinema and practical techniques for videographic scholarship, the question arose of how to link the two together. Placing the list of primary theoretical texts alongside a set of videographic exercises, we noticed that certain essays paired well with specific exercises, such that the written content could be explored productively through a specific videographic technique. The following is an account of the weekly combination of primary texts and accompanying videographic exercises that occupied the first weeks of the course:

Exercise 1: Climate Fiction PechaKucha

To introduce the concept of ecocinema to the class, the video essay *Climate Fictions, Dystopias and Human Futures* by Julia Leyda and Kathleen Loock (2023) proved to be quite valuable. Not only is it one of the few videographic works on cinema and ecology that existed before our workshop, thus providing a useful model for what the final projects of the course could look like, as well as a sample of films to consider as "ecocinema," such as *The Day After Tomorrow*

(2004), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Don't Look Up* (2021). We assigned five films from the video essay from which students could select to perform a videographic PechaKucha. This task drew inspiration from a similar activity from the Middlebury workshop, in which ten short clips of six seconds are extracted, typically to highlight a recurring motif within the film.

Some results revealed unexpected elements driving a film's climate fiction narrative. A compilation of clips between a father and son duo in *The Day After Tomorrow* exposed an emotional core to the climate catastrophe scenario. Another PechaKucha on the disaster movie *Geostorm (*2017) highlighted an array of computer interfaces in the film that characters use to visualize and manage an environmental disaster, while also providing a cost-effective way for the film to give an appearance of blockbuster production values.

Exercise 2: Ecocinema Affective Voiceover

The PechaKucha exercise gave a first indication of the extent to which elements such as affect, tone, and genre can influence audience engagement with the ecological content of a film, a notion elaborated by the first critical reading of the seminar, Nicole Seymour's essay "Irony and contemporary ecocinema" (Weik von Mossner 2014, 61-78). The essay considers a range of affective and emotional registers found in ecologically themed documentaries such as *Food Inc*. (2006), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Grizzly Man* (2005), and how affective elements are as influential as scientific research or logical argumentation in determining an audience's relationship to a film's ecological themes.

The text posed the possibility for the students to experiment with affect through voiceover. In this exercise students chose a clip from one of the documentaries in Seymour's essay and re-recorded its voiceover or dialogue. Several students reported discomfort in matching the emotional registers of ecocinema documentary voiceovers, making them sensitive to the degree to which affect is deployed in what might otherwise be perceived as informational content. One outstanding student exercise combined a re-recorded voiceover from *Grizzly Man*, in which the title character pleads for rain during a drought, with footage of a torrential downpour in T*he Day After Tomorrow*. This juxtaposition demonstrated an appreciation for another dimension of Seymour's argu-

ment: that irony can function as an effective deployment of critical affect, by providing a critical space of detachment from which to engage with climate catastrophe.

Exercise 3: Ecomaterialist Epigraph

Following the extensive accumulation of an ecocinema bibliography over the first two exercises, for the next round we chose to focus intensively on a single film production to introduce the ideological framework of ecomaterialism. We found an ideal case study in the essay "500,000 Kilowatts of Stardust: An Eco-Materialist Reframing of *Singin' in the Rain*" by Hunter Vaughan (Starosielski and Walker 2016, 36-61). As a rigorous retrospective examination of the ecological footprint that can be associated with the iconic Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), the article reframes the film as a site of the film industry's systematic exploitation of natural resources: "how, both on- and off-screen, media use nature to produce culture".

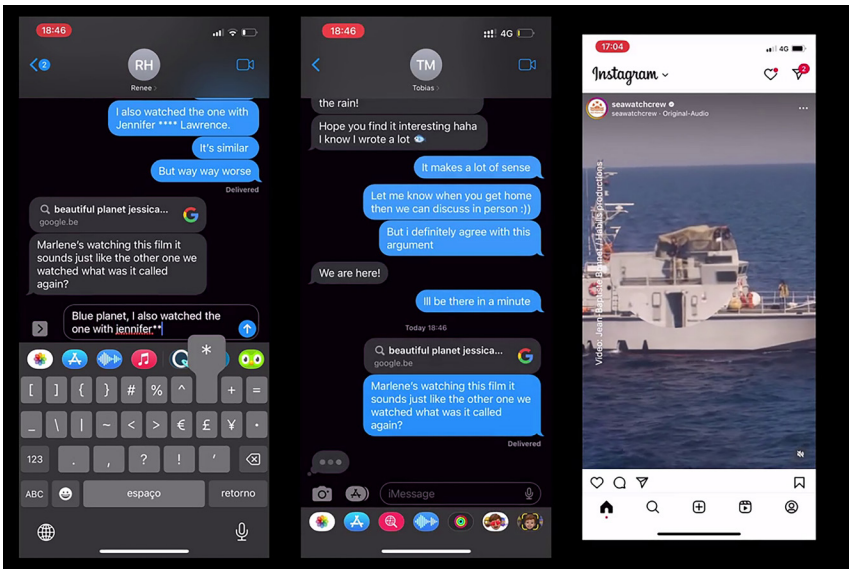
As we intended for the next exercise to allow students to practice applying text and graphics on screen as a videographic technique, we saw this as an opportunity to establish direct relationships between Vaughan's text and *Singin' in the Rain*. We therefore assigned an ecomaterialist epigraph, in which students applied selected passages from Vaughan's essay to iconic scenes from the film. One of the outputs colourfully animates the text in an inspired choreography with the onscreen dance sequence. As if applying Nicole Sey-

Screenshots from "Singing in the Rain Text & Graphics", Tobias Quezado-Deccker, Marlene Fisher (01, 02)

mour's call for ironic affect to the epigraph, the arrangement and interpretation of text critically highlights hyperbolic aspects to Vaughan's ecomaterialist polemic, such as when he likens Gene Kelly's gleeful kicking and splashing in the rain to an act of physical assault on his environment. The exercises thus vividly provide an arena for the student to evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of textual arguments in direct relation to their media objects.

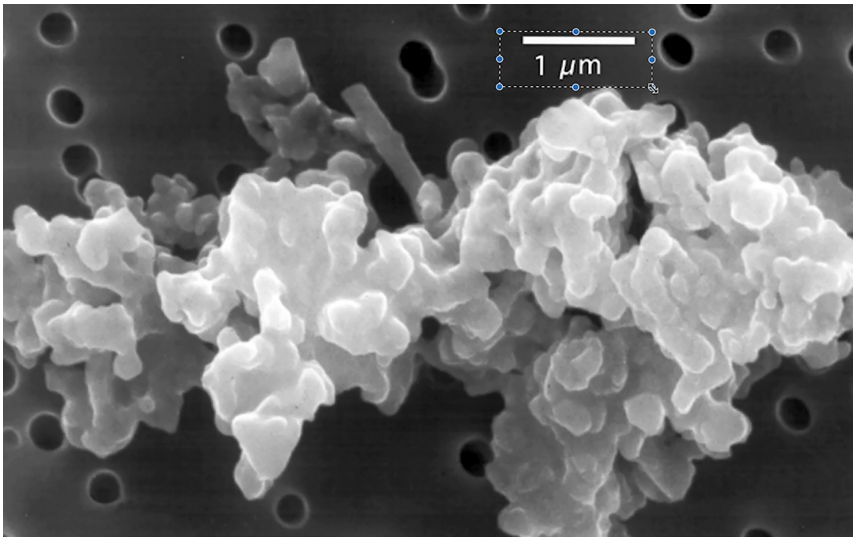
Exercise 4: Planetary Desktop Recording

Following typology, affect and materiality, the concept of visuality provided the next theoretical framework for ecocinema. Videographic criticism allows for a thorough exploration of the assumptions regarding perspective and point of view as implied in the role of a researcher, especially as mediated through audiovisual technologies. In the chapter "Sublime Earth" of his book *Planetary Cinema*, Tiago De Luca elaborates on the notion of the "technological sublime", offering a detailed account of the evolution of planetary cinema, from 19th century Panoramas and Georamas, to contemporary IMAX films such as *Blue Planet* (1990), *A Beautiful Planet* (2016) and *Earth* (2019) (De Luca 2021, 49-84). This journey through time in planetary iconography illustrates how "the sublime Anthropos enters into the field of visibility thanks to the sublimity of space technology."



Screenshot from "Smartphone Investigation", Tobias Quezado-Deccker, Marlene Fisher, Renée Hendrix (03)

The films analyzed in De Luca's essay served as a starting point for students to explore possibilities of "technological sublime" through desktop recording. Videographic applications of desktop documentary engage with the spatio-temporal boundaries of online research as mediated through the desktop, touching on both the epistemology and ethics of online access. This exercise allowed for evocative investigations of Earth through the internet and spatial metamorphoses on a planetary scale, while at the same time providing an opportunity to broaden perspectives on the countless technical possibilities that the desktop tool offers for academic filmmaking. As an example, Cecile Xuetong Feng's desktop film *Silice de Memoire* (which has since screened at the Locarno and Pesaro international film festivals) unfolds as a contemplative journey through the digital realm—a poetic inquiry that transitions from abstract text-based searches to an ambient exploration of earthly and extraterrestrial mining.



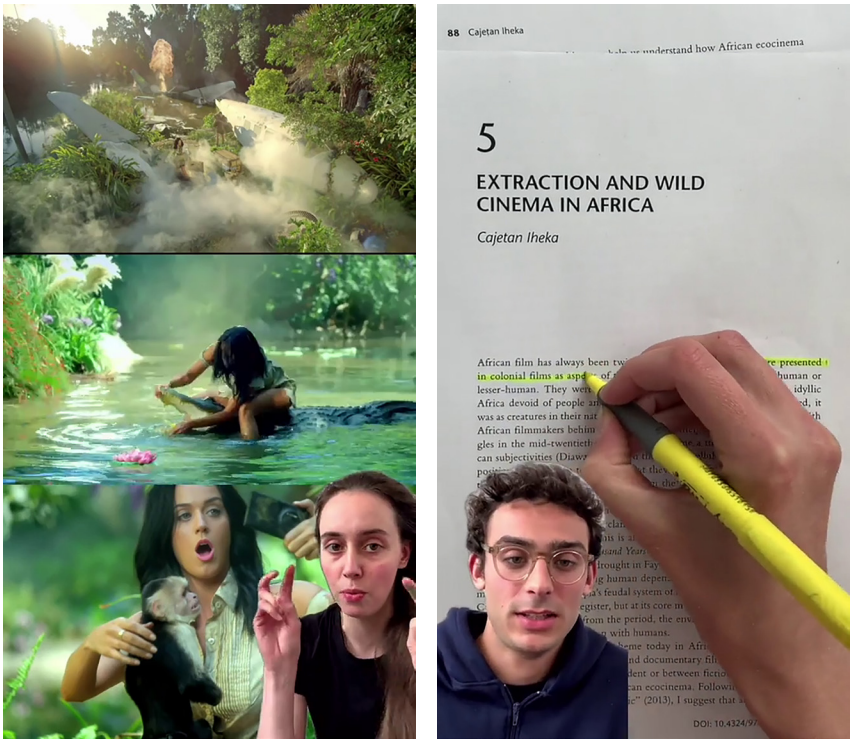
Screenshot from "Silice de memoire", Cecilia Xuetong-Feng (04)

Exercise 5: Hidden Infrastructure On-Camera Response

Having observed the generative effect of confronting text with image in the ecomaterialist epigraph, we sought to practice an alternative confrontation with text by introducing embodied filmic practices. For this purpose, we selected a text we felt could inspire an active engagement with physical environments, "Unsustainable

Cinema: Global Supply Chains", written by Sean Cubitt (Rust et al. 2023, 19-33). This complex essay examines the magnitude of the film industry's environmental and social impact, uncovering the depth of the invisible infrastructures of exploitation that operate beneath the planet's terrestrial and oceanic surfaces. The videographic exercise required students to record themselves on camera responding to the contents of the article, thus offering another example on how to apply critical theory to a media object, or rather, applying themselves as media objects responding to critical theory. Filming themselves served as a form of processing dense and complex written content, and articulating it into their own words.

However, the text proved to be more daunting for the students to understand than we expected. One exercise exemplifies the students' resistance to the complexity and abstraction of the text, which was due in part that it, unlike the other texts of the course, did not cite any audiovisual examples. The video expresses a longing for visual accessibility missing from the text, which the students' vide-



Screenshots from "Camera Reaction", Elsa Despoix, Francisco Noites de Oliveira (05, 06)

ographic response ironically was meant to provide. Indeed, the most audiovisually accomplished result was produced by two students who abandoned Cubitt's text in favor of a different essay from the collection, "Extraction and Wild Cinema in Africa" by Cajetan Iheka (Rust et al. 2023, 87-102). They apply the author's proposed analytical methodology to critique a set of popular music videos to convincing effect. The video incorporates techniques found in TikTok videos such as presenting the authors faces alongside the media objects being discussed, and first person perspective of the text being highlighted as it is being studied. These modes of embodiment effectively convey their experience of the research process, projecting onto the viewer as a shared experience of investigation.

Final project video essay

The progressive series of exercises, designed to teach fundamental technical concepts in videographic filmmaking in relation to key eco-cinema concepts, served as a preparatory phase for students to produce their own video essays as their final projects. Students were able to define their preferred topic, presenting it first in the form of a short trailer, as a videographic equivalent to an abstract for a final research paper. In some cases, the trailer itself amounted to a convincing work of videographic scholarship: one example explored the field of ecofeminism in cinema through a videographic compilation of the recurring themes and clichés that define female roles in ecofilms.

Screenshot from "Women in Ecofilm", Elsa Despoix (07)

A sample of the themes from the final videos reflect a fascinating diversity in how the students applied the ecocinema topic to their own lines of research:

- greenwashing in fast fashion media;
- the narrative strategies commonly employed in ecological awareness videos, as well as their dubious production practices;
- the role of trees in filmic adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbit films;
- a poetic anthology of a tree's life cycle and its transformation into books, combining embodied filmmaking with extracts from renowned films;
- the effect of science fiction cinema on the "orbital imperialism" of the emerging industries of outer space;
- the anthropomorphic appeal of penguins in ecocinema.

We were genuinely impressed by the degree of elaboration there was on the part of the students in applying the basic ecocinematic concepts presented in the class to specific topics of their own choosing.

Screenshot from "An Eco-sublime Approach for Unsustainable Production", Ioana Suciu and Stefan Costache (08)

Among the most noteworthy outcomes, Ioana Suciu and Stefan Costache researched animated feature films with ecological narratives to study their thematic, aesthetic and affective properties. They argue persuasively that animation can activate a larger space for audiovisual imaginaries to engage environmental dilemmas than other forms of cinema can manage. However, the authors do not fail to refer to the forms of exploitation and precarious working conditions behind this industry, calling into question the extent to which eco-conscious animation masks the footprint of its own practices.

Another standout, Carlo and Franco Serra's final video essay offered an original ecocritical reading of the most renowned Vietnam War movies, highlighting the production details of landscapes, lifeforms and laborers exploited for the sake of producing images of mass destruction presented as prestige cinema. Their final video was especially gratifying as Carlo and Franco were among the students who initially expressed misgivings about the course even as they committed to it. Among their doubts were the relevance of ecocinema to their own interests (genre cinema, in the case of Carlo and Franco), and the merits of dedicating an entire semester to pro-

Screenshot from "The Footprint of Vietnam War Movies", Carlo Federico Serra, Franco Enrico Serra (09)

ducing video essays on ecological topics, which they feared might be too narrow a thematic focus. Both in their breadth of topics and depth of research, the final videos bore out the relevance of ecocinema for each of the students and the capacity for it to produce fascinating videographic scholarship.

Discussion

> Seriousness is not the only affective trajectory possible in ecocinema. I argue, in fact, that the political project of ecocinema demands "unserious" affective modes such as irony, self-parody, and playfulness. (Seymour 2014, 61-78)

This quote from Nicole Seymour serves as a fitting account of our own experience teaching the Video Essay Atelier for Ecocinema seminar. As non-specialists in environmental studies instructing students who were not trained in filmmaking, we relied on a videographic teaching method that could foster a spirit of mutual exploration, allowing ourselves as a collective to engage environmental topics with a sense of experimentation, discovery and play. The course followed the ethos described by Liz Greene, to teach the student, not the subject, modelling ways for them to make their own connections to the topic of ecocinema. Greene writes, "My role in facilitating these sessions is to try and help students make connections, offering a way in to consider the context of these discussions" (Greene 2020, 15).

Similarly, by linking videographic techniques for editing, voice, text, desktop recording, and self-presentation to ecological concepts such as climate fiction imaginaries, ecocinema affect, eco-materialism, scales of visualization, and hidden media infrastructures, we could provide a model for how students could make their own inspired connections between theory and practice. This open and exploratory method was crucial for overcoming stigmas of seriousness that often surround environmental topics, allowing students to find their own situated positions in the topic, as practiced through their voices, words, or on-screen appearances. By applying the concepts they learned to their individual interests, the students collectively mapped out a range of topics that resonated with them.

It was not long after the course completed that many of the videos found their way to the public, at a programme of student films as well as a masterclass on ecocinema, curated by the International Conservatory of Audiovisual Sciences (CISA) and the Locarno Filmmaker Academy, respectively, both presented at the 2023 Locarno Film Festival. The video essays drew interest seemingly by sheer virtue of their subject matter; in an increasingly crowded landscape of video essays preoccupied with cinephile pop culture topics, these videos stood out. The ecological focus of these video essays led one audience member to question the ecological implications of video essays themselves, inextricably connected to a larger crisis of media overproduction and consumption. At the same time, the audience was struck by how the video essays presented provoked a greater consciousness about one's own role in the production and circulation of media content, whether in questioning what topics were in need of more attention that video essays could serve, or about the exhaustive effects of media activity on material resources and the environment. One audience member representing the film industry wondered if video essays could provide a set of best practices for successful ecocinema narratives. At the same time, it was posed that video essays themselves may embody an ecocinema practice, as they entail the reuse of existing media, a form of mediatic composting that makes greater use of the intellectual and aesthetic resources to be found within a work of media.

This last observation points at a crucial factor that may define video essays as eco-cinema, not in form, but in practice, in a time when, as argued by Sean Cubitt, "digital production, distribution and exhibition are placing tremendous strains on human and non-human alike". Jean-Luc Godard famously formulated that it is less important to make political films, but to make films politically; similarly, the video essay can stand as a media ecological practice, not merely by virtue of exploring ecological topics, but by enacting an ethos of ecological sensitivity and responsibility to media objects in their production and circulation. Adopting an eco-materialist perspective, one can consider the video essay as a revolutionary practice that repurposes and upcycles content within the ongoing context of media overproduction and waste. Additionally, the video essay does not need to support the establishment of a canon of films that can be designated as ecocinema, but practice a way of viewing

any and all films and media through an eco-conscious lens. One can follow the example of Thom Anderson's seminal feature-length videographic exploration of Los Angeles in cinema, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, which was part of the viewing syllabus for the seminar. Just as Anderson's film treats fiction features filmed in Los Angeles as incidental documentary footage of the city, one can take films of all genres, origins and contexts, from overt ecological documentaries to Hollywood blockbusters, animated films and B-movies commonly dismissed as "trash." Through the video essay, all of these materials become the soil from which to cultivate an eco-conscious media practice.

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A Decade of [in]Transition

Reflecting on Past Challenges and Future Possibilities

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Abstract

"A Decade of *[in]Transition*: Reflecting on Past Challenges and Future Possibilities" describes the editorial experience of the award-winning, peer-reviewed journal *[in]Transition* on the occasion of its ten-year anniversary. After an introduction on the journal's initial theoretical framing, the first part considers the production of new knowledge historically by engaging with select pieces published throughout the past decade while also reflecting on challenges the journal faced in the first decade of publication. It also considers early challenges faced by the editorial team such as the problem of establishing scholarly legitimacy for a new methodology and making the videographic method accessible to both junior and senior scholars. The second part considers the production of new knowl-

edge via newer provocations, such as vidding, the embrace of YouTube, and other videographic modes that push against traditionally-defined boundaries of the "essayistic." Our reflections occur on the eve of *in[Transition]* migrating—after a decade as a joint venture with MediaCommons—to the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), joining a roster of other open access scholarly journals.

Keywords: editorial review, *[in]Transition*, knowledge effect, open peer review, videographic criticism.

Introduction

As the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic criticism, *[in]Transition* has advocated for the scholarly legitimacy of this new methodology through our unique open peer review system and our mission to explore what constitutes the creation of new scholarly knowledge. The founding editors established a central criterion underlying the kinds of scholarly work it would publish, specifically work that produces new scholarly knowledge through a creative use of multimedia tools. On the journal's ten-year anniversary and in anticipation of the next step of our growth, we reflect upon the challenges and possibilities of publishing academic films while looking towards future trends. At the center of this is a consideration of how videographic criticism not only produces knowledge by conventional means, but also how it can produce, through engagement with and reworking of its source material, something more powerfully evocative: what might be described as a "knowledge effect."

[in]Transition has phrased the concept of knowledge effect as such: work "should produce new knowledge about its subject, or about film and moving image studies, *through* its audiovisual form" (authors' emphasis). Conceptually, this framework is inspired by Roland Barthes, in particular his essay "The Third Meaning" (1973). Reflecting on Barthes in the context of videographic forms, co-editor Christian Keathley discovered that working with audiovisual texts to frame a critical argument also pushes a maker toward using audiovisual features of the source material for aesthetic effect (Keathley and Mittell 2011). Keathley believes that what Barthes is proposing—the application of the poetic form upon scholarly writing—is uniquely applicable to videographic criticism: "the most ef-

fective videographic works—those that produce the most potent knowledge effect—are those that employ their audiovisual source materials in a poetically imaginative way" (Keathley 2011). Thus, early issues of *[in]Transition* celebrated work employing formal experimentation in order to generate knowledge effects beyond the informational and the symbolic. While recognizing the latter as meaningful scholarship, we privileged videographic work that could also achieve a third meaning through form. Similarly, co-editor Catherine Grant located a unique knowledge effect in videographic criticism as a form of performative research. For Grant, drawing from the work of J. L. Austin, Brad Haseman, and Barbara Bolt, the translation of research (symbolic data) into images and sounds creates "utterances that accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects" (Grant 2016). For Grant, this performativity includes such formal devices as the desktop documentary, multiple screens and text, and re-enactment and mosaic aesthetics. In short, for both Keathley and Grant, the promise of videographic criticism lay in how its novel form can both question and augment the production of new knowledge.

Recently, we note some healthy skepticism about this original direction, particularly in terms of rethinking the boundaries of scholarly inquiry and our expectation of "new knowledge." For example, in their introduction to the insightful *The Cine-Files* issue 15, editors Tracy Cox-Stanton and Allison de Fren begin noting how "of necessity, [*[in]Transition* reviewers and essayists] had to consider what makes videographic work publishable" (2020). Indeed, there have been numerous occasions where we have reconsidered work that expands our boundaries of scholarship. For example, in that same issue of *The Cine-Files*, Ian Garwood offers a taxonomy of how *[in]Transition* creator statements work to justify the value of videographic work. His third category is specifically about how creators have pushed for expanding the boundaries of scholarship: "The scholarly value of video essays is enhanced by their association with (popular) internet culture" (2020). This is one area we have worked to engage more with, as it describes navigating an ongoing, contemporary change in creative digital technologies, access to primary materials, and dissemination avenues. How will the journal adapt its focus on scholarly videographic scholarship in order to embrace new creative practices and subjects?

We will be tracing this question via two analyses: Morton, one of the original co-founders of the journal, will consider the production of new knowledge by engaging with select pieces published throughout the past decade that reflect challenges the journal faced in the first decade of publication, most notably: the quest for institutional legitimization, the pedagogical challenge of teaching the technical aspects of videographic production alongside formal and rhetorical norms, and the assembly and mentorship of a diverse and inclusive roster of creators and reviewers. Ferguson, a 2019 addition to the editorial team, will consider the production of knowledge via newer provocations, such as vidding, the embrace of YouTube, and other videographic modes that push against traditionally-defined boundaries of the "essayistic." (Note: Drew will be using the "we" pronoun, as the historical section was written with input from the larger collective, and Kevin will be using the "I" pronoun due to the speculative nature of his section.) Our reflections occur on the eve of *in[Transition]* migrating—after a decade as a joint venture with MediaCommons—to the Open Library of Humanities (OLH), joining a roster of other open access scholarly journals.

Part One: Reflections on the Past (Drew Morton)

At the end of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference (SCMS) workshop "Visualizing Media Studies: The Expansion of Scholarly Publishing into Video Essays" in March 2014, we introduced the first issue of *[in]Transition.* This inaugural issue featured videos curated by the editorial team that best illustrated the scholarly potential for videographic criticism and might serve as models for exploring the methodology. These videos were published along with short commentaries where the co-editors attempted to mount cases for how they illustrated Barthes's "knowledge effect." As written in the introductory statement:

> The goal of these inaugural issues is […] to illustrate the breadth of work beyond obviously discursive or meta-critical essay formats, and to show that such forms may not only be promising as communicative tools but also as ones central to fundamentally changed procedures of audiovisual research *by digital practice* (Grant et al. 2014).

Keathley chose kogonada's "What is Neorealism?" to emphasize how delivery of the voiceover created a "mood of mystery, one not similarly achievable in writing" and how the filmmaker's use of split-screens and doubling creates an uncanny and dizzying effect. For Keathley, both devices not only allow us to "see" koganada's argument, but also to "feel the vertiginous effect" of the knowledge" (Keathley 2014). Grant chose Thomas Elsaesser, Anne Bachmann, and Jonas Moberg's "Bergman's Senses." Using Elsaesser's own writing on museum culture, Grant wrote about how the compilation film structure can place unique demands on the spectator by expecting them to give "meaning to perception itself" (Grant 2014). Essentially, the subtraction of the individual clip from its contextual, narrative flow can be made to force the viewer to become a more active participant in realizing the work's argument. To quote Grant, "Unlike written texts, they don't have to remove themselves from film-specific forms of meaning production to have their knowledge effects on us. And we can *feel*, as well as know about, the comparisons these videos enact" (Grant 2013). In both their selections, Grant and Keathley highlighted the complementary affective dimensions of videographic work. Morton's curation, Benjamin Sampson's "Layers of Paradox in *F for Fake*," mapped Bill Nichols's documentary modes onto videographic criticism. Morton describes Sampson's video as a mixture of the expository and poetic modes (in contrast to a subject that largely uses reflexive and expository modes). That is, in order to function as scholarship, videographic criticism cannot completely share Orson Welles's approach to "making art about art" because Sampson is "making an argument about art" (Morton 2014). Morton was arguably the most conservative of the editorial team with regard to how he expected videographic works to produce knowledge. For Keathley and Grant, the knowledge effect advocated for by Barthes allowed for artful arguments. Morton, on the other hand, clung a bit to tradition.

Two main themes emerged in the enthusiastic conversations that took place after the SCMS workshop: the question of scholarly legitimacy and how to make the videographic method accessible to uninitiated scholars. One of the editorial team's initial concerns was the lack of a precedent for recognizing videographic criticism in promotion and tenure cases. To address this problem, the editorial team worked with the SCMS board to have *[in]Transition* officially

sanctioned as a collaborative "project" with the *Journal for Cinema and Media Studies*. Project manager Jason Mittell suggested the format of open peer review. Mittell encouraged the team to lean into the social media dimension of the MediaCommons host platform to explicitly foreground evolving debates about scholarship and for the sake of transparency. In short, let the peer reviewers make the case for why videographic work counts. In "Making it Count" for *The Cine-Files*, Ferguson and Morton (2020) later described a variety of practices for explaining videographic scholarship in tenure and promotion cases, but we regularly hear concerns from faculty about the impact of their videographic work on personnel committees.

Thus, the editorial team adopted open peer review and took it upon themselves to recruit a diverse editorial board that included established scholars who engaged in forms of academic filmmaking, filmmakers whose work functioned as a form of more popular criticism, and scholars who primarily worked in print who we felt would be strong supporters of this new methodology and whose expertise would be valued as the occasional peer reviewer. Beyond desk review, it was imperative to have submissions vetted by a subject area expert and a videographic critic who could speak to the work's capacity to create a "knowledge effect." Moreover, it was imperative to recruit an editorial board that understood their unique role in the open peer review process. Yet, there was an interlocked concern: by naming so many visible and productive videographic critics to our editorial team and expecting most of those scholar-creators to submit elsewhere to avoid conflicts of interest, would we receive a steady enough influx of polished submissions? The bigger question became how we might cultivate a deeper bench of practitioners, especially given how many videographic critics at the time were self-taught. We also needed to account for the relatively small number of practitioners at the time versus the amount of academic labour required for thorough peer review.

Initially, several members of the editorial team conducted workshops at the annual SCMS and other Media Studies conferences, helping to facilitate tutorials on ripping clips from physical media and sharing pre-production methods and general tips. In addition to the workshops, 2017 saw the launch of the Videographic Criticism and Digital Humanities Scholarly Interest Group (SIG) within SCMS. The SIG coordinated an "Ask a Practitioner" booth in the

book room designed to help colleagues troubleshoot technical problems or just have a casual conversation about getting a piece of scholarship started in a new format. While these initiatives were hopefully beneficial to our colleagues, none of them came close to having the impact of the annual Middlebury Scholarship in Sound & Image workshops facilitated by Grant, Keathley, and Mittell and the accompanying open access resource *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*. Through their workshops, more than seventy scholars have become part of the broader community of practitioners and twenty have published work in *[in]Transition* (Middlebury.edu). Moreover, several alumni have since organized their own videographic conferences while others have successfully lobbied for other scholarly publications to consider videographic works (Keathley 2023).

Returning to the question of how the journal has highlighted works that create a unique knowledge effect by reflecting upon the works we have published in the last decade, we see a methodologically diverse and critically robust selection of work. For instance, Booth Wilson's "Landscape in Paradigms: Ford's Monument Valley," Kevin Ferguson's "Volumetric Cinema," and the guest edited special issue on eye tracking showcased that videographic criticism could serve as a home for other digital humanities tools such as Google Earth and scientific imaging software. Shane Denson's "*Don't Look Now*: Paradoxes of Suture" was an interactive videographic work that enabled "the viewer to see, and to experiment with modes of seeing, in a new way" (Denson 2016). Miriam Ross's "Stereotowns" linked stereoscopic photography to contemporary 3D technology via one of the first 3D works of videographic criticism. The journal has published works on video games, live music accompaniment, HGTV house-flipping shows, and desktop documentaries.

To return to the concern about making the videographic method accessible enough to maintain viability, the journal has maintained a quarterly publication schedule for a decade now. As we prepared for the migration of *[in]Transition* to the Open Library of the Humanities, we determined that our acceptance rate has stayed between 25-35% over the last decade. The editorial team would note that we rarely issue a complete rejection (mainly reserved for cases where the submission does not fit the mission of the journal). In-

stead, the team and peer reviewers work to provide feedback for revision as long as the process is being undertaken in good faith. Submissions are either revised to the satisfaction of the editors and reviewers or are ultimately withdrawn by the submitter. In close, it has been the position of the editorial team to approach videographic criticism's capacity to create a knowledge effect with an open mind since the journal's inception, and we have only gotten more explicit in encouraging such a form of videographic practice.

Part Two: Looking to the Future (Kevin L. Ferguson)

I was invited to join the editorial team of *[in]Transition* in 2019, when the original collective expanded from four to six. I was familiar with the journal, having previously published in and served as a peer reviewer for it, but this would be my first time working in an editorial capacity on a project of this size. Thus, this reflection is informed by my entry into a developing field, with a desire to maintain standards while also looking to future directions. I believe the experimental nature of my more successful work marked me as a good candidate to potentially help the journal grow after its initial success, so I speak from a personal perspective that often but not always aligns with the larger editorial collective. At the time I had no idea what to expect, what to say, when to push back, or when to simply agree, particularly around that recurring primal question: is this really what we mean by "videographic"?

I was delighted to find an open-minded, egalitarian group who shared the same concerns. There was already a clear editorial vision in place, but there was also a palpable curiosity about submitted work outside of our respective backgrounds. Sometimes this had to do with the subject ("I've never even heard of this Galician filmmaker"), the approach ("I'm not as familiar with disability studies as I could be"), or the technique ("I have no idea how 3D video actually works"). To me, videographic work in particular requires equal attention to these three distinct components of scholarship, such that identifying potential reviewers was often a unique puzzle of pairing subject expertise with videographic experience. It would not be enough to confirm that the ideas or arguments were in line with academic norms; the videographic expression of those ideas needed to carry as much, if not more, weight.

A dizzying amount of change has happened in the world in the five years since I joined *[in]Transition*, exacerbated in no small part by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected academic publishing in both small ways, such as delayed response times or publishing schedules, and large ones, such as the relevance of new media technology or new uses of existing ones. For example, spending increased amounts of time on the then-new application Zoom—learning how to screen share or use emojis or raise one's hand to speak—offered a crash course in establishing new communal norms for presenting oneself digitally. TikTok reached one billion users in 2021, the same year Facebook rebranded as Meta and heavily invested in virtual and augmented reality experiences; both companies' success would depend on balancing a consumer's familiarity with existing concepts of what the internet "was for" with the promise of new, enhanced experiences. For TikTok, this meant capitalizing on a direction previously staked out by Vine, which was primarily mobile-first and emphasized brevity; for Meta, the opposite was true, requiring additional virtual reality hardware and encouraging longer periods of engagement. How would videographic criticism adapt to new uses of media technology? How might an increasing reliance on screens for professional, educational, and personal contact during the pandemic shape the videographic form?

TikTok and Meta are but two cursory examples in a contemporary media ecology that might help us look to the future of academic filmmaking. Today, the field finds itself relatively established, with multiple peer-reviewed journals, numerous annual conferences, and recognition by academic departments. This is not to say that videographic criticism is as yet as universally accepted as the traditional monograph or written article, but practitioners are in general less burdened by the earlier need to justify the approach itself. Some of this no doubt also stems from the wider cultural acceptance of audiovisual forms for disseminating information in general. Searching for information will increasingly lead to a narrated video rather than a bulleted list; while Google still returns text-based results first, "videos" as an ontological category are generally listed second.

However, the satisfaction that comes with recognition carries a warning: what's next? The wider interest in and accessibility of the audiovisual is, ironically, probably not great news for media literacy in the humanities: TikTok is awash with pseudo-science misin-

formation; YouTube (owned by Google) is filled with hours-long monetized "reviews" promising to "explain the ending" of cultural texts; X (formerly Twitter) readily invites the quick dissemination of false videos of news events. And at the time of writing, it is too early to tell just how bad AI-generated content or deepfakes will be, but . . . I think it is safe to say it will be very bad without a corollary attention to developing media literacy strategies.

I could go on in this techno-skeptic vein, but what most captivates me intellectually about trends I would otherwise see as terrifying are the potential ways they might cross-pollinate and enrich the field of academic filmmaking. To return to the three different categories I mentioned above that frequently guide my editorial thinking at *[in]Transition*—subject, approach, technique—I find myself simultaneously skeptical of and intrigued by:

- how YouTube's monetization policies and algorithms have developed certain norms around video length, thumbnails, and presentational style;
- the role of film festivals such as The Marienbad Film Festival or Uppsala Short Film Festival in offering a venue for scholarly work that is frequently more poetic than explanatory and the relationship between festival success and academic recognition;
- the dominance of mobile, app-based sites of production such as TikTok and Snapchat that encourage remix or reuse, frequently inviting self-presentation as a primary mode of address.

Let's look more specifically at a fourth example that to me currently generates the most interesting provocations for the state of academic filmmaking: works that deal with fan cultures and practices. These are videographic works that tend to focus on popular texts not typically embraced by the academy, use newer theoretical juxtapositions, and/or adopt techniques that borrow more from contemporary social media practices than from traditional written scholarship. While aca-fan practices are not in and of themselves novel in academic contexts, (cf. Jenkins 1992), there has been less videographic work in this vein. A good example of this form is Samantha Close's (2023) "Speculative Identification: (a character study)," recently published in *[in]Transition*, which uses fan-written fiction, hashtags, and popular song lyrics to examine a character in the adaptation of

the fantasy series *Good Omens* (2019). Close's work uses some conventional videographic techniques, such as on-screen text and sound replacement, but also draws from fan cultures rather than academic ones in ways that made me reconsider the boundary (if there should be one) between academic work and fan cultures. After all, as Melanie Kohnen wrote in her review, "both fan fiction and academic analysis represent the act of communal knowledge production" and producing new knowledge is the essential requirement for our journal.

The journal has seen increased submissions in this area, but I have also noticed more discussion of fan-based practices at academic conferences. For me, 2022's "Theory & Practice of the Video-Essay" conference at UMass Amherst illuminated the challenges and frustrations of newer voices feeling they needed, as with videographic criticism in its initial days, to make an argument for justifying inclusion. I was struck by work from practitioners such as Clare O'Gara and Anne Ciecko, who presented, from quite different perspectives, an argument for expanding the field of what we consider appropriate subjects, approaches, and techniques, often explicitly in opposition to more traditional academic filmmaking standards.

At the same time, the ubiquity of uncritical or amateurish "video essays" on YouTube seems to incline academics to resist accepting more popular modes. On social media, well-known practitioner Kevin B. Lee (2023) recently responded to a "generational" taxonomy of YouTube video essay waves with a reminder of a pre-2016 "Gen Zero" of YouTubers, also including Matt Zoller Seitz, kogonada, and Jim Emerson, that "gave zero fucks about copyright" at the time and whose work is mostly erased today because of copyright strikes. This is a helpful reminder that the media historical practices of even the last decade can shift radically as creators respond to technological affordances, in both positively creative and historically destructive ways. In this vein, the 2022 Sight & Sound poll of Best Video Essays begins by paradoxically noting "one consistent trait: diversity" (Lee et al. 2023). Indeed, the list includes a wide range of work that would have likely surprised the field ten years ago. It is easy to identify work that needs improvement for forms that one is already familiar with. Seeing the future is much more challenging.

[in]Transition's first decade of existence finds it well poised to meet this challenge. Our new platform will more robustly address

preservation and access issues, with diamond open access policies that allow for the widest reach for contributors and readers. As the editorial collective also reshapes, we will continue to encourage a diverse range of videographic practices and perspectives, embracing future directions in scholarship.

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A Filmmaking Research Continuum

The Articulation of Creative Practice Research

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Abstract

Exploring aspects of the development of filmmaking research within the Academy over past decades, this article focuses on creative practice-based methods and the establishment of filmmaking as a legitimate research endeavour. It delves into the nuances of filmmaking research methodologies, specifically the rearticulation and repositioning of research practices to encompass both the work of filmmaking production and further filmmaking engagement with its reception. The importance of research statements in elucidating scholarly contributions made by films and other screen works, like scripts and video essays, is emphasised, alongside discussions of

peer-review processes and the role of creative practice research journals in fostering critical dialogue within the filmmaking research community. Despite ongoing tensions between academic and industry requirements, the article argues for the progress of filmmaking research as a distinctive discipline with distinct methodologies, highlighting the need for continual refinement in quality assessment metrics to reflect the evolving nature of the field.

Keywords: filmmaking, peer-review, research statement, screenwork, creative practice methodologies

Introduction

Filmmaking in the Academy has matured. The opportunity to present filmic outputs and screen works produced through practice-based research has been nurtured for forty years (Kerrigan et al. 2015). Practice-based methods of research have contributed to a vibrant community of filmmaking researchers, qualified within their disciplinary norms, to conduct research in a way that allows it to "be understood as making a recognisable contribution to knowledge within the fields of cultural production from which it emerged" (Dovey 2007, 65). It appears that this community is achieving the aspirations of Dovey, who was seeking the recognition of filmmaking in the Academy so that it would be aligned with "cultural industries as playing not just a training and education role but a research role" (2007, 65).

Our filmmaking research is part of a global Western filmmaking discipline and as authors we acknowledge our geographical and cultural specificity as Australians who have a white, Anglo-Saxon heritage. Filmmaking research in this paper includes *screen production*, a term commonly used in Australia (Kerrigan et al. 2015), where we are focused on Western practices as observed predominantly in the UK and Australia. We are not positioned to speak for diverse practices and contexts of research and filmmaking in other countries, particularly the Global South where varied social, economic, political, and cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping those filmmaking practices (Dawson and Holmes 2012; Kishore, Sarwal and Patra 2014; Kishore and Saxena 2019).

The discipline of filmmaking research is defined as research created through a film and/or a screenwork that contributes new ideas

and/or practices which advance scholarly and cultural knowledge by pushing at traditional filmmaking boundaries and research methods (Kerrigan and Callaghan 2018). Films and screen works as research outputs are also known in an Australian context as *Non-Traditional-Research-Outputs* (NTROs) and the scholarly value of these forms of research is now "largely accepted alongside more traditional forms of research" (Crofts and Nevill 2019, 284). However, the written word is still relied on to explicate the research in a screen work and it is now an accepted disciplinary practice for research statements to be published alongside a screenwork. To ensure research quality is maintained when reviewing the screenwork, both screenwork and research statement are peer-reviewed in tandem (Crofts and Nevill 2019).

It is not possible to have a film or screenwork assessed at an institutional level, or within a national assessment of research excellence inside the Academy, without a description of how the film or screenwork contributes to new knowledge, and/or impacts and engages a community. This means filmmaking researchers must usually articulate the new knowledge that has resulted from the filmmaking activity in written form for a screenwork to be deemed a research output.

Extending the boundaries of Filmmaking Research

Filmmaking activities as contemporary forms of Western filmmaking research were discussed and debated as part of the Filmmaking Research Network project (FRN) from 2016-2018. Academics from 21 Universities came together with the UK's University of Sussex and the Australian University of Newcastle, co-leading the project. A survey conducted by the network reached 24 countries with researchers in 112 Universities responding (Kerrigan and Verdon 2019). The FRN consolidated and made claims to legitimise the methodologies and creative practices used to ensure filmmaking was perceived by the academy as a research endeavour (Kerrigan and Callaghan 2018). Seven filmmaking production modes were recognised by the network: professional practice; interdisciplinary; documentary; fiction; essay films; screenwriting; and digital media hybrid works. Crucially, the network found that films produced within academia often attempt to fit within industry models that are largely hostile to the characteristics of academic research out-

puts. Since the FRN project, debates have continued regarding commercial modes of filmmaking (Mateer 2018) alongside the maturation of a new sub-discipline, videographic criticism, based on the audiovisual essay (Álvarez López and Martin 2014).

Videographic criticism (Grant 2016) is based on scholarship that draws most often on the cultural history of cinema as primary material. This research most often critiques and examines cinema through exploring "filmmakers or genres, specific movies or fragments therein, or a more theoretical aspect of the 'cinematic machine' in general" (Álvarez López and Martin 2014, para. 4). Álvarez López and Martin (2014) argue that studies of the videographic moving image sit at one end of a continuum with found footage collage at the other. We suggest that this continuum may not end with found footage, but instead could be extended to connect with the filmmakers who originally created the found footage as well as those who create cinema. Repositioning cultural and cinematic reception into a space in which filmmakers create films through cultural production (Johnson in Bourdieu 1993, 5) fosters research connections between film production and cinema reception.

The connection between audio-visual scholarship at one end with commercial modes of filmmaking at the other creates a continuum across theory and practice. In turn, it acknowledges the "cinematic machine," central to a cultural critique of the medium exists because of the mass production of commercial filmmaking. These connections link filmmaking production with screenwork reception and/or consumption across a continuum in which cinema is produced and firstly consumed by audiences in a commercial context, then re-consumed as a cultural commodity—that is, remixed through audiovisual cinematic scholarship. Videographic criticism has found homes in online journals including *Screenworks* and *[in]Transition* where creative artefacts with accompanying research statements are peer-reviewed and published. These new connections between commercial modes of filmmaking and audiovisual scholarship, made evident since the FRN, might now call for a reworking of the filmmaking research definition.

Rearticulating Filmmaking Practice Methodologies

By redefining filmmaking research to include the reception and/or cultural consumption of films, along with their production, includ-

ing videographic criticism, we are suggesting it is possible to create a scholarly continuum that employs similar methodologies in order to undertake filmmaking research. Academic filmmaking research communities are recognised by both niche and broad discipline descriptors, with *filmmaking*, *screen production* and *screen media* describing core research disciplines which are derived from the wider disciplines of film, screen, media and communication, cultural studies, art and design, and the creative arts (music, creative writing, drama, dance, performing arts).

The establishment of "Creative Filmmaking Research" (Kerrigan and Callaghan 2018), and "Screen Production Research" (Batty and Kerrigan 2018) as formal methodologies, draws on creative practice research descriptors that emerged through "Creative Arts Scholarship" (Smith and Dean 2009). Applying these research descriptors to filmmaking and screen production required significant and sustained engagement and articulation because the nomenclature that describes creative practice research overlaps, interlinks, and can produce specialist "research insights" (Smith and Dean 2009, 5) not collected through any other methodology. The creative practice research definition argues that research is "conducted in the process of shaping an artwork; or research […] is the documentation, theorization and contextualization of an artwork – and the process of making it – by its creator" (Smith and Dean 2009, 3). The research defence around the creation and shaping of an artwork, based on professional practice expectations, has been collected and debated by many, including the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA). Recognising a need for clear and communicable research standards in the discipline, ASPERA investigated perceptions of filmmaking research quality in the Academy and published quality guidelines for research excellence in NTROs in an Australian assessment context. This work was completed, however, without any engagement from the cinematic-, film- and cultural- studies disciplines. Two ASPERA reports produced in 2017 and 2018 identified a key tension: the "call and response" between filmmaking process (generating new knowledge for teaching and the discipline more broadly) and product (public exhibition, social impact that have significance for esteem measures) (Batty and Glisovic 2017; Batty et al. 2018).

While process-focused research thrives in the iterative, reflective space, achieving public recognition through a finished film often operates as a proxy measure for research success and quality. This tension poses challenges for screen production researchers as even with successful public exhibition or distribution of screen works, academic institutions may not always recognise films as research outputs (Batty and Glisovic 2017, 3). The ASPERA reports aimed to address these problems of recognition through providing examples of quality indicators and measures of esteem. The report examples subscribe to a then-dominant approach of citing proxy measures rather than the arguably more subjective, intrinsic measures of research excellence. Some Australian universities such as The University of Sydney (UoS 2021) and Swinburne University of Technology (SUT 2022), now refer internal peer reviewers for NTROs to intrinsic quality indicators. By proposing intrinsic quality indicators like innovation and significance, instead of relying solely on public reach or industry success as proxy measures, these institutions are working to shore up disciplinary integrity and recognition within academia, regardless of external factors. The work done by ASPERA defends the research enquiries of filmmaking practitioners who produce predominantly works for the screen but also those who produce unpublished screenplays as creative research outputs.

Notably, these ASPERA reports did not address research approaches often used to create audiovisual essays. As Grant (2016) argues, videographic criticism uses performative approaches to capture the research creation of an audiovisual essay. This approach emerged within the creative arts as a research methodology "which may include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code, all work[ing] performatively" (Haseman 2006, 4). It is best applied in research conducted through performance and human movement, where bodies are used to perform research as an artistic practice in front of a live audience (i.e. dancers). The application of Haseman's use of performativity to defend the work of a researcher who is practicing as a film editor can be considered as an extension of the original parameters of the definition. Film researcher and screen editor Pearlman (2016) has mounted similar arguments about how an editor works with a "mass of moving materials in front of them" (2016, 69), and this means the performative activity of editing is a "cogni-

tively complex artistry of shaping time, energy, and movement, particularly the movement of events, emotions, image and sound to create cycles of 'tension and release'" (2016, 68). Pearlman (2016) argues film editing is an embodied and intuitive practice, in which an editor's filmic agency, intuition around aesthetic choices of shots, timing, and rhythm is part of the research practice of editing. This lends itself to recognitions of shared activity and intent between filmic performative practices and creative practice research.

And these arguments run in parallel with those put forth by Grant (2016) and Álvarez López and Martin (2014), who defend the employment of creative practice activity from a cinema and film studies perspective, in which videographic criticism makes a clear link "between audiovisual creativity and reflective research/scholarship" (Grant 2016, para. 9). The creative practice defence has been employed to justify the audiovisual choices made by cinema and screen scholars who employ an audiovisual essay to "probe [and] identify a new energy in creation and critique" (Álvarez López and Martin 2014, para. 2). By rearticulating filmmaking and creative practice methodologies to encompass the recent debates on videographic criticism, it is possible to align approaches and research designs defended by filmmaking practitioners with those who are seeking to advance scholarship around the cultural consumption of cinema as a scholarly and creative pursuit.

The approaches, from both filmmaking as cultural production and filmmaking occurring through forms of cultural consumption, lay claim to their respective filmmaking practices being described as a research activity because they are articulated through a research statement that is published in tandem with the screenwork. We next examine the pragmatics of demonstrating research legitimacy through the research statement.

Approaches to Research Statement Rhetoric

Filmmaking research outputs, including audiovisual essays, publish a research statement with the film or screenwork in order to explicate new knowledge and provide crucial context for the work. Although we respect the strong argument that a creative work embodies research without recourse to ancillary material (Sullivan 2005), we argue that for filmmaking researchers and peer reviewers, research statements create clarity. The publication of a film as research

output following peer-review, where the film can be viewed, usually online, recognises the value of knowledge contained within the work, alongside an explication highlighting the research context, contribution, and at times impact, which may not be immediately evident within the screenwork.

Scholars like Gibson, make a case for "audio-visual knowledge" (in Batty and Kerrigan 2018, vi) and identify the challenges of enacting and communicating research concerned with "the specific, quick qualities of the cinematic medium itself" (ibid.). Significantly, Gibson notes that research in this discipline takes place with three possible intentions: "research *for* creative projects, research *about* creative projects and research *through* creative projects" (ibid. vii). Gibson's notion of the "cognitive two-step" (ibid, vii) is evidenced through the powerful combination of creative work and research statement. For Gibson, new knowledge gleaned *through* practice, not just in the creative practice output, is where research contributions in this field predominantly lie. We suggest that scholarship on the audiovisual essay may fit into research *about* creative projects given that this form of scholarship is argued to be about a medium that is part of cultural history (Álvarez López and Martin 2014, para. 4), whereas research into production modes of filmmaking would be research *through* creative projects.

Research statements supporting creative practice outputs provide opportunities for articulating theoretical approaches, exploring creative and professional procedures, as well as contextualising cinematic theories and movements. In doing this, they provide rigour and an analytical framework for research enquiries that can be focused on both consumption and/or screen production. Peer-reviewed journals publish films and screen works accompanied by research statements, where the statement may outline research questions, methodology and approaches used, and provide theoretical context and the impact and significance of the work. In the journal *[in]Transition* for example, "most commonly, the creator statements are used to comment on the relationship between videographic criticism and other forms of research practice… the majority of statements focus on promoting the unique qualities of audiovisual thinking" (Garwood 2020, 6). Each journal stipulates their own specific criteria and word count (Screenworks submission 2023a; ASPERA 2023a).

The journal *Screenworks* hosted the first publication of films with research statements, released as a special issue in the *The Journal of Media Practice* in 2007 (vol 8.2) (*Screenworks* 2023b). The editor, Dovey, and associate editor Crofts, used an open review process, where the audiovisual work was published alongside two anonymous peer reviews. An open and critical debate of the research between scholars was encouraged allowing for "a dialectic between the contextualising research statement and peer review through which new knowledge can emerge" (Crofts and Nevill 2019, 295). The journal *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy* also employs anonymous open reviewing. Publishing the film and the research statement online with de-identified peer-reviews and subsequent researcher responses "fosters critical debate on the evolving nature of screen-based creative practice research, by highlighting a variety of research aims and approaches" (ASPERA 2023).

The *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy* journal emerged as a complement to the biannual *Sightlines* screening event. The curated screening event is widely accepted as evidence of research significance in Australian national research exercises and serves an important function in the research and creation process with each screening at the event followed by a research Q&A between filmmaking-researcher and audience. These conversations afford filmmakers opportunities for informed feedback and to share research insights. Submissions to the *Sightlines* journal must be "filmmaking research that occurs in the university sector" (ASPERA 2023b, para. 2). As mentioned, the film or screenwork is published with the research statement along with the responses from two anonymous peer reviews, but also with a filmmaker's response to the peer-reviews in a "call and response" exchange. This format developed in response to early issues in which the submitted screenwork was most often not altered to accommodate reviewers' suggestions, unlike the common response for traditional research output review responses. Peer reviewers' requests for more detail in submitted research statements has seen the word count extended from 500 words to up to 1500. The community of filmmaking researchers value this form of dialogue that emphasises a research exchange while preserving the integrity of the film or screenwork. Difficulties arising for ensuring the anonymity of peer reviewers due to the relatively small size of the discipline brings its own set of challenges

when allocating reviewers. The peer reviewing and publishing process is framed to mitigate concerns regarding the effectiveness of review when cost and technical requirements of the research output may preclude changes, and creates a publishing environment that acknowledges that the screenwork may not be modified solely in response to reviewer comments.

A discussion of peer-reviewing processes that amplify filmmaking research produced through journals like *Screenworks* and *Sightlines* presents another disciplinary continuum in which filmmaking research publication content is underpinned by broader disciplinary enquiries and traditions. For example, *Screenworks* is a journal that appears to value visual and aural aesthetics produced through refined production choices, generating research that aligns with traditional fine 'art' pratices. Conversely, *Sightlines* is more recognisably connected with professional and vocational practices within industrial models of filmmaking, closely aligning this type of research with media and communication traditions. In noting these differences that link aesthetics to industry and cultural practices, we argue again for a continuum across research generated through filmmaking in the Academy. This is creative practice research that is becoming less siloed, more inclusive, and that represents a more open form of scholarship that has the potential to be extended to disciplines well beyond our screen discipline boundaries.

Having established that the research statement is critical to advancing our research community's dialogue, we acknowledge that these journals, and thus their editors, the community of peer-reviewers, and filmmaking researchers, have been instrumental in maturing the discipline into a field that produces world class research outcomes. Often this is research activity that would not be possible to carry out in industry due to commercial pressures. Nevertheless, frictions remain for filmmaking and screen practitioner-researchers who choose to make work within academic contexts (FitzSimons 2015; Kerrigan et al. 2016), with allegiances to their academy employer in tension at times with allegiances to the broader scholarly discipline beyond their institution. On balance however, it appears that the discipline is increasingly legitimised and now more often recognised as a field of research excellence within the academy.

Conclusion

The argument encapsulated here demonstrates how filmmaking research matures inside the academy as practitioners and researchers continue to assess eligibility and defend assessments of research quality for this work. Alongside is an acknowledgement that foundational definitions that help a discipline to grow may need review to include the emergence of sub-disciplines, as in the example of videographic criticism. Key indicators continuing to steer the growth of filmmaking research are industry aspirations (both film production and cinematic consumption industries), localised university assessment practices, and compliance with national research quality and impact exercises where traditional text-based research and citation continues to dominate. Although the discussion above confirms that the discipline is now established and has matured over a relatively short space of time, there remains a need to explicate filmmaking research through the written word – the research statement – in order to make research contained within a film or screenwork evident to all.

Metrics often used to assess films and screen works are not yet adequate to convince the broader research community of the intrinsic value of filmmaking research. Efforts of scholars in establishing and maintaining peer reviewed journals that publish creative outputs alongside text-based research statements show that it is possible to create a community that assesses research from a place of shared understanding and can provide rigour and scholarship to advance understandings of this set of research practices. It is clear that international capacity-building work embarked on over the last decade is ensuring that filmmaking research is responding positively to academic challenges and tensions. From this foundation, ongoing adjustments to how research is measured will ensure that the discipline continues to grow within the Academy.

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The Textual, the Audiovisual, and Videographic Thought

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Abstract

This essay draws on the author's experience as founding editor of the videographic *Journal of Embodied Research* (*JER*), as well as their own artistic research practice and critical theories of embodiment and identity, to examine shifting relationships among the textual, the audiovisual, and the videographic. Addressing each term in sequence, the essay builds on the idea of embodied research, and the experience of developing a style guide for *JER*, to rethink the textual and the audiovisual in the context of the videographic. As the space of videographic thought becomes ever more fluid and all-encompassing, it is incumbent upon filmmakers of all kinds to critically reexamine the ways in which video remains entangled with bodies, places, and the still-powerful technology of the written word. To support such a reexamination, approaches to academic filmmaking and the video essay should be put in conversation with practices of embodied research.

Keywords: practice research; embodied knowledge; video essay; media ontology; decolonial theory

In 2017, I founded the *Journal of Embodied Research* (https://jer.openlibhums.org). Published by the Open Library of Humanities, *JER* is "the first peer reviewed, open access, academic journal to focus on the dissemination of embodied knowledge through video." As of this writing, the journal has published nine issues comprising 35 video articles and six editorial video essays. Based in performing arts, but with highly interdisciplinary ambitions, many of the journal's contributors are dancers, musicians, and theatre-makers who have not previously crafted works in the medium of video. Others are filmmakers who produce artistic works onscreen but are less familiar with the context of academic publishing. In this essay I consider what I have learned about videographic form, both as editor of *JER* and in ongoing conversation with the field of videographic film criticism.

In an earlier essay, published alongside the founding of *JER,* I discussed what I then called "the video way of thinking" (Spatz 2018). While that essay equates "video" with the audiovisual, this one focuses on the entangled yet still important differentiations between the textual, the audiovisual, and the videographic as modes of thought. I am a relative newcomer to film and media studies, hence the references and conceptual background of this essay may be less familiar to some readers. Yet for nearly a decade I have been working to bring experimental performing arts into richer contact with practices of video recording, editing, and publication. My most recent video essay interrogates the corporeality of whiteness in conversation with the ontological turn in recent black and indigenous studies (Spatz et al. 2022). My most recent monograph proposes a decolonial media ontology, critically analysing the differential racialization and coloniality of dominant and emerging forms of knowledge (Spatz 2024). This essay attempts to articulate what I have learned from these projects in a new disciplinary context, with the aim of supporting further conversation.

On the Textual

As a scholarly journal publishing video, *Journal of Embodied Research* (*JER*) joins a growing landscape of audiovisual and videographic journals that includes not only *Screenworks* and *[in]Transition* but also the nonlinear, exposition-based *Journal for Artistic Research* and others that make use of its Research Catalogue platform. Within

that landscape, *JER*'s specificity is found in both its foregrounding of embodiment — understood at least initially as a "first affordance" that precedes all mediated forms (Spatz 2017) — and its approach to the form of the scholarly journal article. In launching *JER*, my intention was not primarily to put existing video works into the academic domain, but rather to investigate and experiment with the institutional form of the scholarly journal. For this reason, *JER* has always defined the "video article" in a way that is simultaneously narrow and capacious. A video article, for *JER*, is a video document or file that has been through a process of peer review. This definition is narrow in the sense that it excludes many of the multimedia forms developed by other journals (such as a video accompanied by a research statement, or a nonlinear composition comprising audio, video, image, and textual elements), as well as nonlinear forms of video (such 360° video, or a work comprising multiple parallel video channels). Yet the definition is very broad in its approach to content, which is defined solely in relation to the peer review process and not by reference to any particular method or criterion, such as the need to make an argument or answer a question.

Perhaps the most significant point in the above definition of a video article is that *JER* does not publish any written material apart from what appears (whether spoken or written) in the video. Even the core metadata that is required for an article to exist within scholarly publishing infrastructures (title, authors, keywords, abstract) must appear first and foremost in the video document itself, which is always considered the version of record. The absence of an accompanying research statement or other writing means that the question of textuality for *JER* is always posed within, not alongside or external to, the question of videographic thought. In other words, textuality for *JER* is something that appears first of all within the space of video and can then secondarily be transcribed. Since its inception, *JER* has always published a transcript of each of its video articles. These PDF and XML documents are not the article itself, but merely transcripts of its textual content, necessary to make that content searchable and indexable in digital contexts. Yet, as I explain below, the act of producing a transcript for each video article has gradually led me to reconsider the extent to which all textuality is retroactively defined through acts of transcription.

When it came time to produce a first style guide for *JER* in 2022, I found that I needed to define certain terms, which had become more and more technical in the context of *JER*'s editorial processes: *text, audiovisuality, videographic.* What has each of these come to mean in practice? I was genuinely surprised by what emerged as our definition of textuality.

> *Text:* The textual is that which can be transcribed into written language or other standardized notation. This includes the verbal content of speech and the notational content of music and dance, as well as words written in any form. Please note that the metadata of any digital object is necessarily textual, because this is (for now) how the internet works. (*Journal of Embodied Research*)

To define the textual as "that which can be transcribed" marks a significant move away from prevailing notions of language as an intrinsically distinct mode of thought. As I have argued elsewhere, drawing on black and indigenous critiques of European colonial logocentrism (Brander Rasmussen 2012; McKittrick 2021; Ferreira da Silva 2007; Spatz 2024), the assumption that language expresses a privileged mode of subjectivity — often linked to reason and rationality — is a result rather than a cause of the privileging of the written word in "western" civilisation. The act of transcribing a video article drives this point home in a practical and immediate way, as it quickly becomes obvious that "the textual" is a wildly diverse phenomenon defined only by its capacity for transcription.

While the requirements for *JER* transcripts have since been relaxed, my initial approach was completist, asking authors to include everything in a video that could be considered amenable to transcription: not only subtitles, intertitles, credits, voiceover, and recorded speech, but additionally all the bits of verbal and textual detritus that might appear onscreen, from a street sign glimpsed in the background to a name drawn in sand on the beach. Absolute transcriptive completion is impossible, yet the very attempt is suggestive for approaching the textual as a mode of thought. The more complete a transcript, the less it resembles a conventional essay (like a transcribed voiceover) and the more it becomes a kind of surrealistic poem, within which all manner of *transcribable* materials

come together in the plane of the written document. In this way, the practice of transcription makes evident just how much our ideas about language are retroactively produced by our technologies of writing. Video itself, as a medium, is not capable of making any distinction between words and gestures, speech and accent, body and place. It is only when an author or viewer attempts to transcribe words that they begin to "pop out" from the audiovisual flow, which may then find itself backgrounded through the foregrounding of text.

Situating text solely within video offers a productive deflation of the logocentric assumptions that still govern nearly all systems of scholarly knowledge. Rather than being a containing framework within which video can be located, text becomes a component of video. Taken to its extreme, this epistemic reversal can be realised in a form I call "illuminated video": an unedited video recording that has been augmented or illuminated by textual annotations. As I said in the editorial video essay introducing *JER*'s special issue of illuminated videos: "Where an illuminated manuscript augments a primarily textual work with visual illustrations, illuminated video uses textual annotation to augment, enhance, investigate, and perhaps even critique a primarily audiovisual work" (Spatz 2021a; see also 2021b). Such an annotative approach will be familiar to practitioners of videographic film criticism, as it clearly resonates with forms like the "videographic epigraph" exercise (Keathley, Mittell, and Grant 2019). Yet in contrast to most film criticism, *JER*'s allegiance to embodied research continually foregrounds the documentary or evidentiary status of audiovisual recording, even as it departs from conventional approaches to performance documentation (Reason 2006; Sant 2017). A productive deflation of the textual as the sole legitimate mode of thought is thereby complemented by a redefinition of the audiovisual.

On the Audiovisual

The above definition of the textual suggests an even broader complementary definition of the audiovisual as that which cannot be transcribed. According to the *JER* glossary:

> *Audiovisuality:* The audiovisual refers to all kinds of audio and video content that cannot be transcribed into written

> language or other standardized notation. Audiovisual elements can be *described*, as in audio description, but they cannot be directly *transcribed.* (*Journal of Embodied Research*)

The apparent openness of this definition is somewhat misleading, insofar as it is necessarily in tension with *JER*'s focus on embodied research. If *JER*'s videographic form is more than just accidentally related to its title, this can only be because the audiovisual remains bound to an operation of tracing or similarity that, even in an age of photorealistic digital image manipulation, derives its meaning from an experientially analogue relationship to bodies and places. I call this mode "experientally" analogue because it produces an image that resembles or is analogous to what the camera sees and hears; and this is the case even when the technology of recording is digital. What is the nature of that relationship today?

In recent months, *JER* has begun to receive submissions that use so-called "AI" imaging processes to produce videos in which bodies appear that never existed. While these technologies could be considered simply to extend the potential of manipulation and deception that has always been associated with photography and cinema, the shift from image manipulation to image generation puts the matter of the body under pressure to a new degree. That pressure is not linked to *JER*'s theoretical focus on embodiment, which is merely another step in a longstanding and transdisciplinary "bodily turn" of the humanities that some may consider to be already exhausted (Bradley 2023, 75–87). Rather, what is new about the use of AI image generation in the context of a scholarly video article is how it intervenes in the relationships that have historically defined audiovisuality, coming between embodiment and audiovisuality, disrupting the analogue link between body and image.

The magic, the potential, and the (often lethal) power of the camera is its capacity to "capture" or trace the world with its uniquely analogue mode of inscription. That capturing power, for all its potential violence, is what allows an infant, a tree, or a river to appear audiovisually in ways that they cannot appear textually. This mode of appearance is what I previously called the "video way of thinking." By that phrase I did not mean the work of the person holding a camera or editing a recording, but rather *audiovisual thought*: the kind of thinking that manifests itself through audiovisual appear-

ance, above all the appearance of audiovisual bodies. (On the politics of bodily appearance, see also Mirzoeff 2017.) This distinction, I maintain, only grows more ethically and politically salient with the expansion of digital image manipulation and generation. Paradigmatically, it is the difference between the thinking that occurs in front of the camera and that which occurs behind it. From the perspective of a final video "work," these may simply be two different modes of contribution or authorship. Yet they also index radically different ways of being at stake in the recorded image. (Furthermore, while I do not have space to explore this here, the recognition of such audiovisual authorship destabilizes the assumed value of anonymity in peer review, with which onscreen appearance is incompatible.)

Is an audiovisual recording of a river really an instance of that river's thought? Why not, if the "thought" of a philosopher is understood to be adequately traced by the precise ordering of a sequence of alphabetic letters put down in their name? Just as an aspect of a writer's being might be captured in a written text, so an aspect of a river's being may be captured in a video. By what right could we call one of these "thought" and not the other?

Pushing this further, the question is not only whether audiovisual recording captures the thought of those whose bodies it records, but also how that authorship might be sustained after the moment of capture. For *JER*, this is again an eminently practical matter, as the formal authorship structure of academic publishing comes into tension with the complex accrediting systems used in collaborative performing arts and filmmaking. While the latter may credit tens or hundreds of individuals in a variety of roles, authorship in the humanities rarely extends beyond two or three names. (Even in the sciences, where hundreds of names may be listed on a research paper, these usually can only be ordered rather than accorded specific roles.) Contributors and editors at *JER* face the same question again and again: Who counts as a co-author? How can we accurately acknowledge the embodied research of those whose audiovisual bodies appear onscreen? How can we escape or overturn the sedimented hierarchies according to which it is almost always the people behind the camera who are understood to be thinking, rather than those in front of it?

To clarify this point, it may help to locate *JER* near the middle of a spectrum that runs from ethnography at one end to videographic film criticism at the other. Conventionally, the visual ethnographer works across a massive power imbalance, in which they are responsible for what will become the highest status and often the only published version of the audiovisual material they collect. The ethnographer therefore carries a tremendous responsibility for that material, which may necessitate institutional ethics review processes or call for more radical approaches (see Jobson 2020). The videographic film critic, on the other hand, most often experiences the opposite power dynamic, as they stand in a relatively disempowered if potentially subversive relation to a "body" of audiovisual material that holds greater social and cultural capital. These disciplinary glosses are merely indicative (some ethnographers study powerful hegemonic cultures and some video essayists work with sensitive material), but they can serve as exemplars of the ethical and political issues that are raised when we take audiovisual appearance seriously as a mode of thought.

JER authors are usually working either with their own audiovisual bodies or with those of their close collaborators. These are relations of relative (or even perfect, when working with one's own audiovisual body) equality, in which embodied audiovisual thought is carried through more or less directly into the video editing processes that produce a final work. Such relations of equality are made possible by the relative availability and affordability of video technologies. In other words, the same technological shifts that enable videographic film critics to re-edit films, and ethnographers to distribute inexpensive cameras to their participants, enable performance practitioners and other embodied researchers to produce our own audiovisual documents, making "embodied research" possible and legible in new ways. And even when *JER*'s articles do approach the relational dynamics of ethnography or videographic criticism, I would suggest that matters of ethical and political responsibility can be usefully reframed through the concept of embodied research, which foregrounds not only embodiment in general but specifically the embodiment of the researcher(s) as a central element of the methodology. It is from this perspective that *JER* approaches the space of videographic thought.

On the Videographic

The two definitions above locate the cut between the audiovisual and the videographic in a perhaps unexpected place. If audiovisual thought refers to the onscreen appearance of bodies (whether human or not), then the videographic begins with the spatial cut between the front and the back of the camera, extending from there through the art of *videography* and into the temporally deferred practice of video editing. The double-sidedness of the camera means that audiovisual and videographic modes of thought have always been reciprocal, distinct in their practices yet dependent upon each other. Hence *JER*'s third definition:

> *Videographic:* The videographic refers to the variety of media that can be incorporated within a single linear video file. In addition to audiovisually recorded material, this includes photos, drawings, sound recordings (including voiceover), diagrams, animation, and onscreen text. (*Journal of Embodied Research*)

If the textual is defined by technologies of writing, and the audiovisual is defined by the experientially analogue (even if technologically digital) technologies of recording, then the videographic today is a layered digital space in which the textual and the audiovisual come together in unprecedented ways. This is the space of montage, a space in which the "language" of cinema is continually deconstructed as new relationships are invented between diverse forms of textuality and audiovisuality. From the perspective of embodied research, there is no fundamental difference between the cinematographer, videographer, director, and video editor. All undertake videographic thought, which is always dependent upon the audiovisual as its substrate. The form and ethics of that relationship are complex and could even be understood as the primary matter explored by academic filmmaking.

For those of us with an allegiance to the critical humanities, the videographic is a space in which we face the impossible task of bringing the deep critical power of textual thought to bear in a radically different domain, one that carries some features of the textual and some of the audiovisual but cannot be reduced to either. Like a writer of words, the video editor conventionally works alone at a

desk or table, separated by their technological medium from the worlds their work is "about." (On the phenomenology of the table, see Ahmed 2007.) The distancing effects produced by this mode of writing have on the one hand enabled the hegemonic systems of financial economics and accounting that structure capitalist and colonial modernity. But those same tools and techniques of distancing can also be leveraged for the articulation of counter-modernities, through alternative modes of writing and thinking. Historically, the cinema screen has been a very different technological space than the written page, operating on a different scale from the intimacy of reading. But as audiovisual works and written texts find themselves increasingly close companions on the screens of laptops, smartphones, and tablets (not to mention the even more interwoven textual-audiovisual assemblages of social media feeds), that difference in scale and medium begins to blur. The videographic, and the digital screen more generally, becomes a new kind of space in which juxtapositions and relations of textuality and audiovisuality might be reworked.

If the experience of *JER* has anything to contribute to an understanding of the ethics and politics of videographic thought, it is a recognition that the videographic is only meaningful in relation to the textual and the audiovisual. The moment that one can tell an app to create a video essay and have it do so is the moment of the death of the video essay — not because the resulting video could never be of interest, but because its connection to specific lineages and relationships grounded in textuality and audiovisuality will have been severed by an algorithm more opaque and impermeable than any Hollywood studio. As the videographic becomes more and more powerful, literally accruing power from the countless server farms that make up the illusory "cloud" of world computing, the urgency of sustaining textual and audiovisual relations only increases. The question of audiovisual provenance, that is the nature of the embodied and emplaced processes that generate audiovisual material, becomes more and more central to the ethics and epistemics of videographic work. These kinds of relations and matters of provenance are what I call *videographic entanglements*: the material connections that thread distant places and people together via the circulation of textual and audiovisual materials, while continually putting pressure on the meaning of those circulations. To-

day's video essayist has at their fingertips a dizzying expanse of textual and audiovisual materials that can be easily transferred into videographic space. From what perspective can and should this material be addressed, incorporated, or reworked? And how might the practice of videographic editing be different, if the materials brought into that space were treated as textual and audiovisual bodies?

With this in mind, it is incumbent upon everyone who edits video to reflect on their own positionalities and entanglements in relation to the textual and audiovisual materials with which they are working and to consider the various modes of thinking that have produced those materials. Existing legal and institutional frameworks such as copyright and intellectual property law, as well as institutional ethics review boards, are profoundly inadequate when it comes to addressing such issues. Already mired in capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal assumptions when dealing with written texts and classical production processes, such frameworks have even less to say about the rapidly intensifying circulation of textual and audiovisual bodies today. It is precisely a task for the critical humanities, in alliance with non-academic communities who also approach and appropriate filmmaking from critical or indeed politically radical perspectives, to address the ethics and politics of our growing videographic entanglements. Doing so means questioning the boundaries and relations between the textual, the audiovisual, and the videographic without collapsing them, as these are the very categories that can help us understand how we are entangled today.

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