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Academic Filmmaking in the New Humanities

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Academic Filmmaking in the New Humanities

Video Essays. Introduction to the special issue

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Catherine Grant *is Honorary Professor at Aarhus University and Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Reading, UK. She carries out her film and moving image studies research mostly in the form of remix-based video essays, and in writing about them. She also runs the* Film Studies For Free *social media platforms, and is a founding co-editor of the award-winning peer-reviewed journal* [in]Transition.

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 second of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking, which contains ten video essays and prose guiding texts. 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 reflexive

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 video essays and some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents. The video essays derive from fields including videographic criticism, anthropology, experimental cinema, and participatory and activist filmmaking.

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

This is the second 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.

Video essays and guiding texts

The first video essay, Ariel Avissar's witty and ironic "'This Is Not What I Normally Do': An Insignificant Step in the Downfall of the Humanities", begun during the Videographic Methods and Practices: Embodying the Video Essay workshop held at Bowdoin College in July 2023, explores the experimental, ludic, and humorous possibilities of videographic criticism. With cameos and inputs from several participants and teachers from the workshop and from the broader field of videographic criticism, this video is also a testament to the experience of participating in a workshop of this kind and in the communities that are made possible as a result of a shared academic filmmaking experience.

Avissar's video is followed by Barbara Zecchi's equally complex, playful and experimental "An accented video way of thinking: Becoming videoessay". This is the latest video essay in Zecchi's already influential exploration of "the accented video essay" towards the theorization (riffing on Spatz 2018) of an "accented video way of thinking", and (like Avissar) Zecchi underscores her project by drawing explicitly on the work and images of other well-known and diversely-accented video essayists. In the emphasis on "becoming", this work reprises themes of embodiment discussed in the articles by Binotto and Spatz in the first special issue. A contribution of this work is also the author's call for replacing the commonly used term "video essay" with the Spanish-influenced spelling "videoessay" as way of revindicating an accented choice.

Stephen Broomer's "Against Illustration" argues—through a self-aware voiceover that cites Raymond Bellour and György Lukács, and through the manipulation and organisation of a visual content drawn from early cinema, Muybridge and Michael Snow—for the poetic and intuitive possibilities of experimental videographic criticism. This video essay positions itself against illustrative forms of audiovisual scholarship in favour of "a methodology of purposeful difficulty" informed by George Steiner. For Broomer, such a methodology makes room for more ambiguous, sensual, and entangled uses of image and sound, locating scholarly investigation in the collage tradition and specifically in the works of the experimental filmmakers Charles Ridley, Bruce Conner, and Peter Tscherkassky.

Contrasting but also converging with Broomer's citational aesthetic and episteme, Samantha Close argues for the video essay as medium of affect in "Feeling Our Way Through the Spectrum of Videographic Criticism". In their contribution to the first of our special issues, Drew Morton and Kevin Ferguson wonder about the implications for audiovisual scholarship of fannish modes like "vidding" (making music video from beloved media objects); Close practices and interrogates vidding as one of a range of modes ranging from explanatory to "enigmatically poetic" in her video essay, which considers the internet video genre of Minecraft Survival Multi-Player. A striking device in the video essay is Close's crayon-rendered version of the Minecraft interface to frame and "command" her investigation, thereby highlighting, as she writes, "the personal and subjective nature of this research process and its simultaneously deep imbrication with technological tools."

The video essay triptych by Nina Jones, Jemma Saunders and Ella Wright titled "Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice" is comprised of the video essays "Academically Insane" (Jones), "Without Knowing It" (Wright) and "Joining the Dots" (Saunders). The authors write that these works "attribute value to the place of experimental approaches within academic filmmaking". They were made with materials gathered during the B-Film Creative Practice Colloquium for practice research PHDs at the University of Birmingham in June 2023 in which participants reflected on being creative practice researchers, including how they perceive themselves and how they believe to be perceived by others in the academic community. Combined, these

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video essays articulate a need for more institutional and community support and understanding for videographic and creative practice within academia.

Maud Ceuterick and Carola Gianotti Mura's contribution is also a compound work. "Academic filmmaking and its discontents: in between videographic criticism and visual anthropology" puts in dialogue two videos, "Filming Out Loud" and "Whose Stories", made from the same raw footage. While Ceuterick reworks the footage using conventions from videographic criticism, Gianotti Mura draws on visual anthropology and ethnographic film methods for her video. Together, these videos reflect on (at least) two possibilities for academic filmmaking and how they might diverge or overlap. This joint submission was also made in the context of a workshop, this time in an ethnographic filmmaking at the University of Manchester's Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in June 2022.

Adopting another sort of dialogic mode, Paul Cooke and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers' "Attempting an Ontology of Participatory Film" reflects on the limitations of ethnographic film and specifically of participatory filmmaking, described by the authors as a distinct mode of production with social justice aims. Focusing on two activist-focussed participatory video projects led by Cooke with young people in South Africa and Lebanon, and turning to Bazin's writings on the ontology of the photographic image, Cooke and Schwandner-Sievers discuss the benefits and pitfalls of allowing images to "speak for themselves". How is the intention of the participant-filmmakers affected as their films move from community showcasing events to festival and academic settings? The (in)stability of meaning becomes a videographic and ethical question posed but left deliberately unanswered by Cooke and Schwandner-Sievers.

Using footage of anonymous tourists at Grand Central Station, New York, shot by the author on a smartphone, Paul Newland's "The Participants" reflects on filmmaking ethics when it comes to filming others without their consent. While Cooke and Schwandner-Sievers take on philosophical questions of meaning conveyed by images produced in participatory video workshops, Newland's anti- or a-participatory filmmaking proposes a provocation in the context of university ethical procedures (essential or inflexible, depending on one's perspective) and on the limitations of participant

consent. The combination of slow motion footage and on-screen text makes this a suggestive addition to the genre of epigraphic video essays.

Sebastian Wiedemann and Verónica Naranjo's "Present Bodies. Emancipated Voices. Or, how to relocate bodies in thought" is a collective video essay that, again, grew from a workshop—in this case, a workshop on gender-based violence during the CineToro Experimental Film Festival in Toro, Colombia, in 2022. Wiedemann and Naranjo see their video as an exercise in "radical tenderness" that locates the body at its centre. The video, accompanied by violin and by participant voices expressing the aspiration for social and bodily agency, shows images of the participants' hands constructing celebratory fabric images of bodies with vulvas, uteruses and breasts. Wiedemann and Naranjo's use of the audiovisual as a research method self-consciously draws on "experimental film as a field of emancipatory and decolonial encounter between the arts, gender studies, and feminist direct political-aesthetic actions".

Laura Dávila Argoty and Valentina Giraldo Sánchez' "Towards an Ecology of Practices in Academic Filmmaking: Speaking nearby Ana Vaz, Javiera Cisterna and Sofía Gallisá" is a sensorial video essay that interweaves the work of the three experimental filmmakers from Brazil, Chile and Puerto Rico, respectively. Like Wiedemann and Naranjo, this video essay and guiding text calls for an anti-colonialist, less extractivist, more plural and collective way of seeing in academic filmmaking. Like Close and Broomer, Dávila Argoty and Giraldo Sánchez find places for affect and entanglement in videographic practice. And like the majority of the video essays contained in the special issue, they insist on, even as they interrogate, the place available for experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic and institutional contexts.

With these two special issues, the co-editors hope to have contributed to the definition or, better, the intensification of the affordances of filmmaking in the academy. Our ethos has been the same as that which Eric Faden (2008) sees as characteristic of the critical video essay itself: we have not tried to offer the "definitive, end-all-be-all, last word" on our theme, but have instead encouraged contributors to suggest possibilities and offer points of departure. Faden writes that a critical videographic practice "explores and experiments and is designed just as much to inspire as to convince"

(Faden 2008). This is also true of our project in these special issues on filmmaking as research method, communication medium and mode of thought in the New Humanities.

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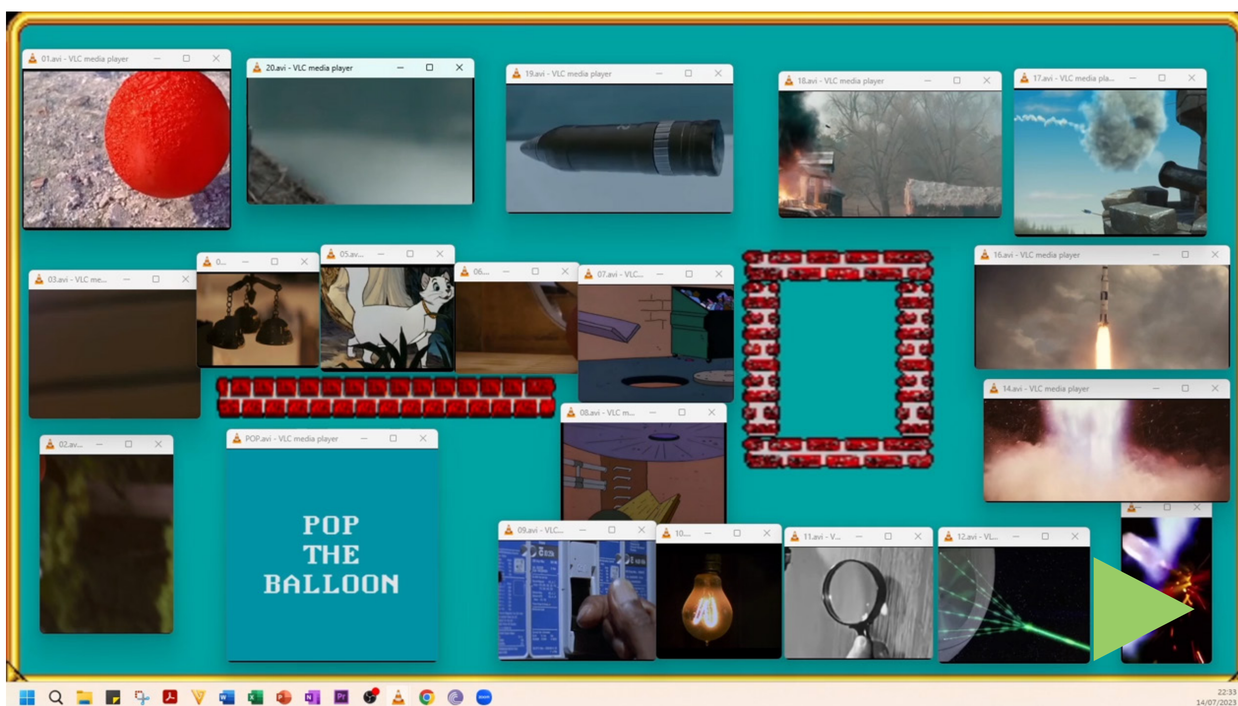
"This Is Not What I Normally Do"

An Insignificant Step in the Downfall of the Humanities



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Abstract

This video essay, a product of the "Videographic Methods and Practices: Embodying the Video Essay" workshop (Bowdoin College, July 2023), is comprised of two sections, exploring constraint-based approaches to videographic scholarship. Part 1, "The Incredible Machine," documents an attempt at recreating a 1990s Rube

Goldberg-inspired computer game interface through the handling of various film clips arranged on a computer desktop. The deliberate avoidance of digital shortcuts highlights the value of playful experimentation within scholarly and artistic practices. Part 2, "The Five Obstructions," presents five interviews conducted under randomly-assigned constraints, fostering unforeseen responses and creative insights. These ludic experiments demonstrate the potential of constraints to stimulate creativity and to provoke unconventional outputs. Emphasizing process over outcome, the video showcases the laborious yet rewarding nature of scholarly experimentation, echoing a broader shift towards embracing the creative-academic journey in videographic scholarship.

Keywords: Videographic criticism, embodiment, constraints, creativity, experimentation, ludic activity

Guiding text

This video grew out of the "Videographic Methods and Practices: Embodying the Video Essay" workshop (Bowdoin College, July 2023). It is comprised of two sections, both conceived as experiments in constraint-based approaches to videographic practice and discourse. These are playful in nature, and employ self-imposed constraints that may seem arbitrary, perhaps foolish, without knowing where they might lead. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, such playful, foolish experimentation has value for both artistic and scholarly practices, in the vein of Charles Darwin's pollen experiment, which he reportedly conducted not knowing where it might lead, commenting: "That's a fool's experiment. But I love fools' experiments. I am always making them" (Biskjaer and Halskov 2013, 33).

In Part 1, "The Incredible Machine," made during the Bowdoin workshop, I attempted to reenact a hypothetical level of the 1990s computer game, "The Incredible Machine," which has players construct increasingly-complex Rube Goldberg machines meant to achieve specified outcomes. I recreated this premise on the computer desktop, manually arranging various film clips to trigger in sequence. I used screen-capture software to record many, many such attempts, while another camera captured the "reverse shot," documenting both the labour involved in the task, and the reactions

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of the various scholars and makers who happened to inhabit the shared workspace, unaware that they were being filmed.

While the task could have been accomplished easily using various digital means – as some of the onlookers handily point out – it was the decision to follow restrictive, self-imposed constraints prohibiting the use of such "crutches" that made the experiment as long, as frustrating, and as productive to document as it has turned out to be. This voluntary adoption of arbitrary constraints falls within the realm of the ludic: the "experiment" functions much like a game, as what Bernard Suits has called a "lusory attitude": the activity of attempting to achieve a specific goal while adhering to rules which "prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means" (Suits 1978, 41). Put another way, "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (ibid.).

This ludic, constraint-based approach carries over to Part 2, "The Five Obstructions," made in the weeks following the workshop. This section consists of excerpts from five interviews with scholars and makers who were asked to watch Part 1 and respond to it, assessing its scholarly merits (or lack thereof). Each interview was conducted under a randomly-assigned set of constraints, an experimental approach loosely inspired by *The Five Obstructions* (von Trier and Leth 2003). While in Part 1, constraints were placed on the process by which a predetermined result was to be achieved, in Part 2, arbitrary constraints were meant to direct the interviewees in unknown directions, prompting responses they would not, presumably, have given otherwise. Part 2 thus utilizes the potential of constraints to facilitate creativity, provoking creative outputs by "overriding the tendency to go with the familiar, which will likely yield only clichés" (Haught-Tromp 2017, 11).

More than merely a ludic activity, the adoption of constraints is indeed commonly employed within artistic practice, where constraint, in its broad sense as "a limitation or obstacle voluntarily accepted by the artist" (Rodriguez 2008, 39), is often seen as a catalyst for artistic creativity. As Biskjaer and Halskov have argued, the willing submission to such "creativity constraints" on the artistic process serves as "both a hindrance/restrainer and a resource/enabler for creative agency" (Biskjaer and Halskov 2013, 37). The use of playful, at-times arbitrary constraints in artistic practice, they argue, can function as "radical experimentation": "doing something

'crazy' or foolish just for the sake of it in order to see what happens," as in Darwin's "fool's experiment" (ibid., 33).

This constraint-based approach is also practiced within videographic scholarship. Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, for example, hold that "*formal parameters lead to content discoveries*," and that working "according to often arbitrary formal parameters" can lead to new insights, unattainable through traditional analytical methods (Keathley and Mittell 2019, 6). Likewise, Alan O'Leary's notion of "parametric scholarship" is premised on the adoption of "more or less arbitrary *self-imposed constraints*" (O'Leary 2021, 76). Such scholarship, he suggests, diverges from "traditional" scholarship in enabling a mode of knowledge production that is "procedural and creative rather than propositional: it suggests not 'Given this, what do we now know?', but 'Having made this, what can we do next?'" (ibid., 93) – an approach also evident in Mittell's discussion of "emergent analysis," in Part 2.

Embarking on these experiments, I did not know where they would lead. In each case, I had an intuition that something interesting might happen, but did not know what it would be or what form it might take, let alone why it might be of scholarly value. I had to make it first. My approach thus echoes Catherine Grant's, when asked to "defend" the rationale behind her research: "I'd rather just carry on with experimenting and seeing where it leads" (Grant, qtd. in Branco 2018, 533).

This video emphasizes process over outcome. As Mittell has argued, while research in the humanities is often framed as "the finished products of scholarship," its scopes and methods are more expansive, and "the processes of discovery and experimentation are often the more exciting and insightful parts of scholarly endeavors" (Mittell 2019, 228). The creative, productive values of these processes are often left out of the final product, as traditional conventions of academic writing dictate that "the labour and process must be effaced" (Grizzaffi 2020, 9-10). Scholars often find themselves working to "cover their tracks," as "the paths travelled to produce 'outputs' must be meticulously effaced in the final product" (ibid., 10).

But scholarly research could be viewed more expansively, enabling the recovery of these "lost" sites of creativity and production. This is particularly evident in research practices that embrace a

more open, essayistic approach to scholarship (Grizzaffi 2020, Grant 2020). The essayistic, as suggested by Georg Lukács, emphasizes "not the verdict […] but the process of judging" (Lukács 2017, 40); it is, as Phillip Lopate describes it, "a continual asking of questions – not necessarily finding 'solutions,' but enacting the struggle for truth in full view" (Lopate 2017, 111). I have likewise attempted to emphasize journey over destination, presenting not only the "successful" outcome, but the struggles and frustrations along the way, as noted by Barbara Zecchi in Part 2. I dwell on "failures" – my own (Part 1) and those of my interviewees (Part 2 and the end-credits sequence). As in *The Five Obstructions*, the video is intended as "a creative and open-ended adventure […] whose outcome was not premeditated" (Rodriguez 2008, 40), where a constraint-based thinking process unfolds "in fits and starts, uncertain of its destiny, its path and its nature" (ibid., 55).

The process also bears evident traces of its context of making. The "experiment" holds no presumptions of objectivity or reproducibility; it would not have been possible, nor taken such a form, in any other context but the one it happened to take place in: the Bowdoin College workshop. The imprint of the context of making is thus an integral part of the video, which is why I have deliberately emphasized it, explicitly presenting it in the intro, and leaving in various in-jokes, such as the intentional misspelling of participants' names, or the use of clichéd musical cues. I did so fully aware that these may be exclusionary – as was the workshop itself, as noted by O'Leary in Part 2 – and that this privilege, the privilege that perhaps enables all "fools' experiments," should be acknowledged.

Likewise dependent on context is the extent to which such mode of knowledge production can be considered "new." The experiment's constraint-based approach potentially situates it at the intersection of the ludic, the artistic, and the scholarly. And if some of its performative, experimental aspects might be considered "new" within the discipline of videographic scholarship, it is only achieved by embracing previously-established artistic and ludic practices. The context of making is thus integral in determining the value of such knowledge-production practices and in recognizing its precedents, as keenly observed by Dayna McLeod in Part 2.

Finally, while frustration is prominently featured and commented upon throughout the video, it is by no means the primary emo-

tion I experienced while making it. The experiment in Part 1, much like the experience of playing "The Incredible Machine" (and many other games), can be an exhausting, arduous process of trial-and-error – as indeed could be said of much of (videographic) scholarship more broadly. And yet, these activities, for all the time and effort they demand, the failures and dead-ends they may lead to, can be as fun as they are frustrating, as pleasurable as they are painful. Thus, I hope the final product manages to convey just how much fun it was in the making. Like Darwin, I too love fools' experiments.

Note

All individuals appearing on screen gave consent to be featured in the video.

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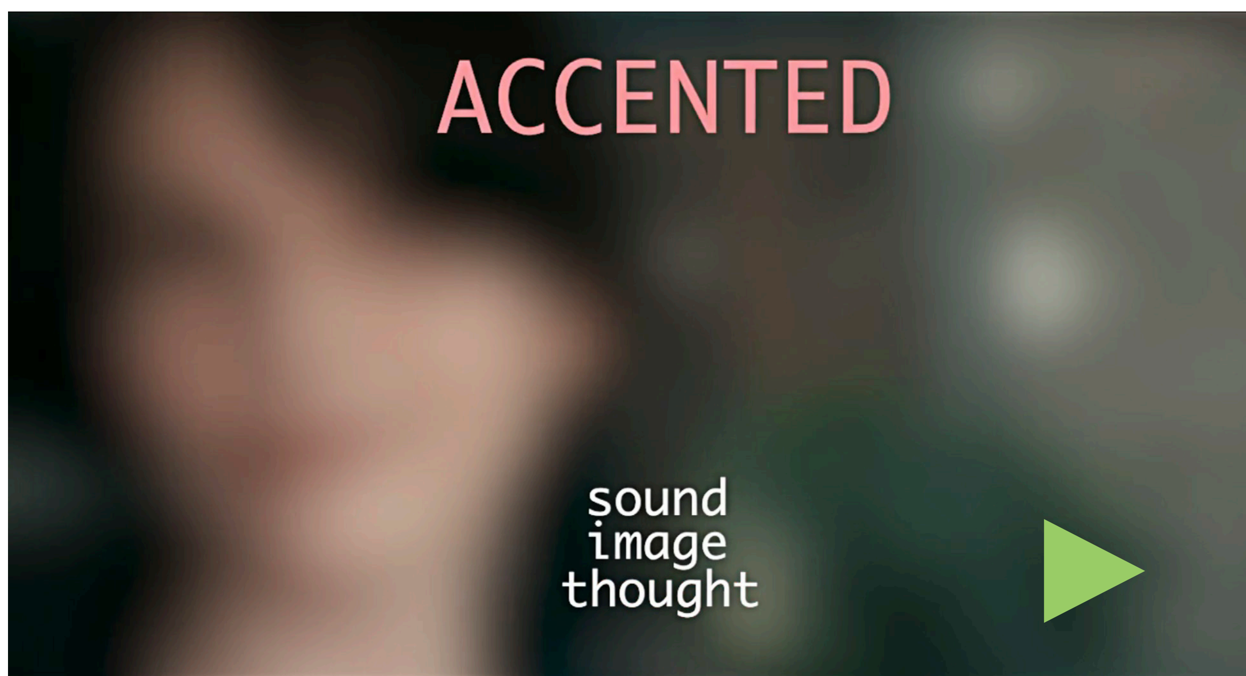
An accented video way of thinking

Becoming videoessay



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

Keywords: accent, affect, becoming, surface, Deleuze

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Against Illustration

Spatiotemporal principles and mimetic rhetorical functions in videographic criticism

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Abstract

Against Illustration advocates for a methodology of purposeful difficulty in video essaying, in search of new critical entrances into their objects of study. The field of videographic criticism encompasses a broad variety of formal approaches that often differ in their invocation of root objects. Where the dominant ideology of cinema has been perpetuated through common systems of visual codes, and tends to invite an evidentiary approach, videographic criticism has often sought, as a symptom and practice of empowered, post-modern cinephilia, to develop subjective and intimate transformations of objects. In this they enrich, celebrate, and just as often, trouble the themes, iconographies and histories of cinema. *Against Illustration* suggests for a reconciliation between the purposeful difficulty of experimental cinema and the promise of such an approach in videographic essaying. To do so, the author explores George Steiner's typology of difficulty in poetry (and in particular its tactical and ontological manifestations), Steiner's suggestions for creative reading/spectatorship, and his pursuit of a critical entrance into an art steeled against easy perception and ready interpretation.

Keywords: videographic criticism, critical cinema, experimental film, materiality, difficulty

In this video essay, I have offered a series of proposals that pass in a sequence, from the tactile transit that cinema has undertaken since Raymond Bellour speculated upon its unattainability, to the purpose of the essay itself, to the limitations of didactic and demonstrative approaches. The questions that I have asked do not have easy answers, and the image at times runs counter to the pronouncements of the narration. The response I offer to these queries is not in the 'illustrative' sequences that accompany each claim, but through another form that, in time, creeps in: the palimpsest, made literal, as these illustrations intersect with one another, all episodes coalescing into one vision, of flickering and co-penetrating superimpositions.

In 2011, Christian Keathley offered with optimism that, in some quarters, the field of cinema studies was following in the hopes of Bellour: for writings to be "more numerous, more imaginative, more accurate," thanks to the newfound 'attainability' of movies

(Bellour 1975, 19). Still, Keathley argues, this is only the beginning of an evolution towards a necessary reinvention of cinephilia and cinema criticism, one that is bound to contend with the sharp distinctions of explanatory discourse and poetic register (Keathley 2011, 181). Keathley's conception is not of a schism between didacticism and intuition, or between evidence and feeling, but an acknowledgment of the promise of audiovisual forms: the critic operating in the material grammar of their subject might evolve a critical approach that is true to that material and that is thus distinguished from a critical heritage reared on the older and more conventional forms of criticism (Keathley 2011, 190).

More than a decade on from Keathley's report, there remain hard divisions of methodology and approach, as well as a burden of disciplinary isolation in scholarly film criticism, however, thanks to pedagogical organizing and community mentorship among video essayists, territory has been carved out for poetic and intuitive approaches. Catherine Grant's prolific output as a videographic critic is emblematic of the poetic bearing in video essaying, resistant to explication of meaning, summoning the mysterious power of her borrowed sources and shaping their plastic and rhythmic traits to match her own individual subjectivity. Grant's work often invites—as art is inclined to—the participation of the viewer in the construction of her work's meaning, emphasizing experiential traits that resist didactic, narrow conclusions: this is an invitation in plastic, drawing the eye to engage critically through the use of techniques such as the multi-screen (*Beast Fables*; *Falling*, both 2019), reflection (*Magic Mirror Maze*, 2019), and the sawed image (*Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade*, 2018). Grant complements the plastic dimension of her work with a curatorial metaphor, as in her text accompanying "Falling: 3 x *Girls in Uniform*" (2023). There Grant argues that curatorial acts can be "articulatory acts as well as ideational ones," and this approach of video as pictures-in-an-exhibition, as salon wall, offers the curated vision as a new entrance into the object, a possibility of bridging associative, poetic thought (Grant 2023, 50). Grant's approach embraces a freedom of form and undertakes the quest for new analytical models that resist field-defining codification, and the example she sets with her work is one of a free, exploratory approach to film studies. This exploratory command often makes the work multi-vocal, as in Grant's epigraphic

works, in which the artist builds perceptual connections between borrowed texts and her own sequence/image, entangling Grant's individuation as a remix artist with those voices that have anticipated her own, as in her use of Gilles Deleuze in *Liquid Perception* (2020), Claude Levi-Strauss in *Carnal Locomotive* (2015), or even in her integration of the literal voices of non-theorists, as in her 2018 memorial to the actress Jeanne Moreau.

The correspondence between such an approach and the forms of knowledge produced by modern and post-modern art becomes especially clear in Alan O'Leary's definition of a parametric scholarship, a definition into which he enfolds Grant's work: "texture, pattern, and world-building" guide such a scholarship (O'Leary 2021). O'Leary's proposal challenges the conservative foundations of an explanatory critical heritage. Audiovisual scholarship demands, by the blank questions posed by form, that the 'reader' participate in the construction of its knowledge. Such scholarship prioritizes perceptual experience and embraces ambiguities, and in doing so, challenges traditional models for the production of scholarship. It produces new knowledge, yet it is also a station in the pursuit of further knowledge.

In *Against Illustration*, I have dwelled primarily on objects that originate in or respond to the early decades of cinema. As Bart Testa demonstrates in *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde*, appropriation is a longstanding strategy of the avant-garde collage film. Such work has an inbuilt criticality, a quality that frays the lines between formal and discursive relations to borrowed light. For example, Ken Jacobs's *Tom-Tom the Piper's Son* (1970) elongates a silent-era film, inventing new ways to expand and exhaust the object of study. Al Razutis's *Lumière's Train (Arriving at the Station)* (1973) and his other *Visual Essays* (1973-1985) are, like Jacobs's film, aesthetically expressive and experiential, but made explicitly discursive through the labels given them by their maker ("essays"). Stripped of such claims, an inbuilt criticality remains, in the selection, manipulation, and technological digestion of these objects.

A discursive, explanatory approach still thrives in many quarters, in part because the material facts of film, or the sequential assemblage of many films, reinforce an evidentiary model of criticism. Like Eadweard Muybridge settling a bet, the explanatory critic cues up images to prove whether the horse is in the air, or its

feet are on the ground; the voice of the explanatory critic use films to illustrate and reinforce their findings, an argumentative model that operates in a vacuum of competition and dominance, and that seeks to exhaust its objects. Against this, I pose the model of purposeful difficulty that is the major legacy of twentieth-century poetry and art: work that functions in an atmosphere of risk, that is experiential and participatory, that often defies description and expands the containers of media. In the past, I have pursued a corresponding critical model, that of George Steiner's typology of difficult forms in poetry, in the analysis of experimental films (Broomer 2017). Difficult experimental films are marked, like the best of art and criticism, by the particular subjectivities of their makers. Against didacticism, they invite the viewer to travel with a blank map. Against explanation, they draw their purpose out from the viewer's experience. They can be deeply edifying without practical applications or reducible 'lessons'. They justify their existence simply by being and nothing more, and they do not pander or demand assent; on the contrary, such films thrive in dissent. The experimental film sets a standard for a critical cinema, and in turn, for scholarly filmmaking and video essaying. From Steiner's typology, it is tactical difficulty—the deformation of material invitation, a steeling-against of form that refuses easy interpretation—that most readily lends itself to the visual arts, and which has emerged naturally from the experimental film through the self-conscious strategies of structuralism. Kevin L. Ferguson's conception of digital surrealism (Ferguson 2016) acknowledges the new ways of seeing present in digital forms, an exploration of those "irrational and automatic digital transformations" that invoke the plastic deformations, aleatoric strategies, and violent provocations of the Surrealists. Ferguson's methodology, which combines data visualization and abstraction to rend form from content, and to expand the container into new multidimensional structures, follows in the strategies of his structuralist forebears. Finally, Steiner's conception of ontological difficulty offers the potential for the video essay to open new directions for subject-object relations and transform irrevocably our consciousness of the object, in which the object of study becomes the ur-text subsumed into imaginative response. The reader/viewer is invited to participate in the creation of meaning, and in doing so, transforms the tendered experience.

In *Against Illustration*, I pursue an aesthetic of purposeful difficulty. In an act of misdirection, I start the first section with plain illustration—the very thing I contest. As these episodes progress, the image shifts from illustration towards ambiguities, of evidence under distress. The suspended image (of the Lumière's train at La Ciotat, in section one) gives way to the bent image (of De Chomon, doubly bent, in section two); the bent image yields to symmetries and inverted polarities of negative and positive (in animations of Muybridge's locomotion studies, in section three); those inverted polarities give way to symmetry and text run backward (in a marriage of magic and materialism, Méliès meets Michael Snow, in section four). When the voice falls silent, in the fifth and final episode, there comes the summit of this progression: the palimpsest, a text written-over, all preceding parts colliding like multiple beams of a projector competing for the territory of the blank screen. If these were once illustrations, they are no more: four sequences, each representing spectacle, evidence and magic, combine to become a fifth, a sensual commingling of colour, lines, and the silvery riddle of the first moving images.

The collage tradition in experimental film, beyond its citations of cinema's origins, offers valuable precedents for a deformative videographic criticism. The Canadian artist and filmmaker Jack Chambers once compared collage filmmaking to the work of a potter, taking materials of the earth and, in transforming them into something new, both honouring and transcending their material origins, ever ready to be shattered, broken down, reformed into new expressions. From Charles Ridley to Bruce Conner to Peter Tscherkassky, collage filmmakers have engaged in formal material critique of the world around them, transforming the stuff of their earth—newsreels, countdown leader, commercial cinema—into new critical experiences, against mere illustration.

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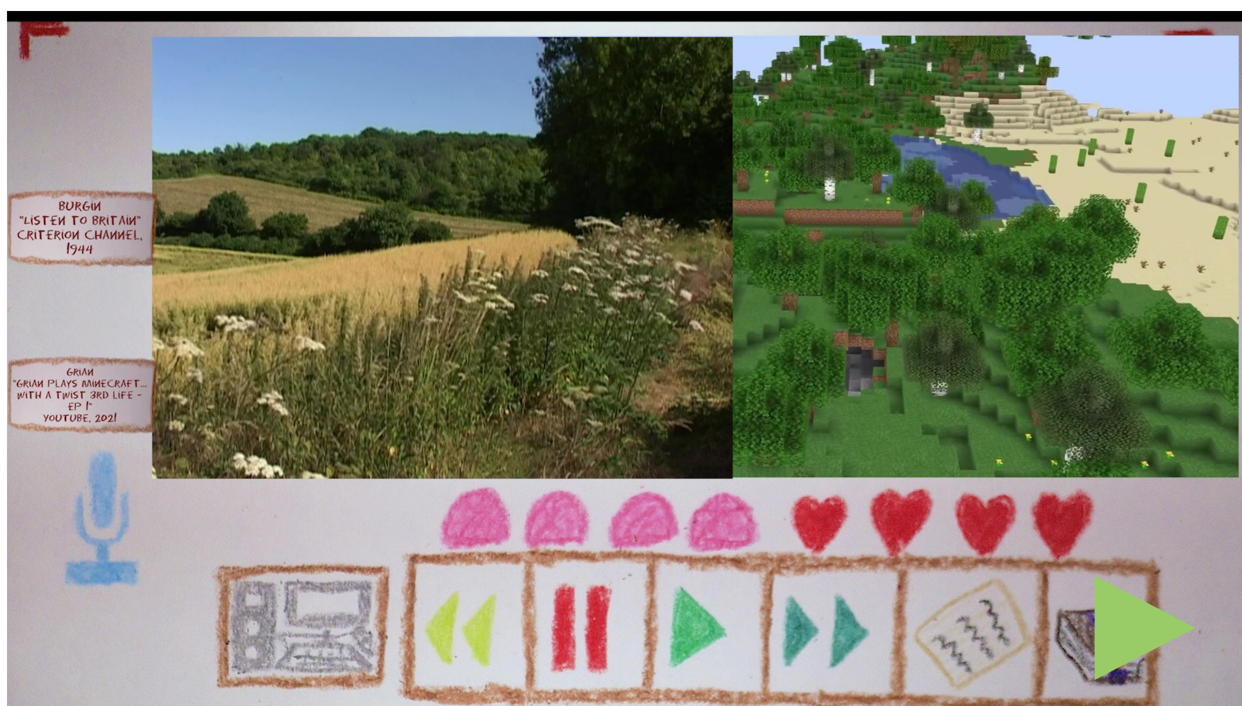
Feeling Our Way Through the Spectrum of Videographic Criticism



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ABSTRACT

Critical argument can be generative in much the same way as art can be, inspiring different "correct" interpretations and new arguments. Academic filmmaking enhances this property by incorporating affective tools and texts, such as vivid footage or popular music, that

move us emotionally at the same time as they form part of a critical argument—and, indeed, those emotional reactions form part of the argument. In this piece, I present a spectrum of approaches that academic filmmaking takes in the videographic criticism tradition: straightforwardly explanatory on one end and enigmatically poetic on the other. I argue that this scholarly methodology is simultaneously deeply personal and affective and, to at least the same degree, imbricated with technological infrastructures.

Keywords: methodology, videographic criticism, digital media, affect, popular music

When I last taught students about non-traditional forms of academic publication, they raised the provocation that the difference between "art" and "argument" is that argument has a clear win condition—you can "get it" or, as despairing students often complain, "I don't get it." In this view, critical argument sounds like a video game, which some define specifically by the ability to "win"—or at least score points (Gameservatory 2021). Art, on the other hand, makes you experience something that is subjective to you. You cannot be wrong about art, they suggested, in the same way you can be wrong about a critical text.

I think many scholars would be depressed by this interpretation of critical argument. They might point to the plethora of interpretations and ideas spawned by central critical thinkers like Foucault or Mulvey as evidence that argument too can spark things inside you that are unique to you, and which you then cite as you express your new ideas in the same medium (writing, in this case)—much as a painter might recall an influential work through their choice of subject, pose of figures, or brush stroke technique. You can still certainly be wrong in how you do this, but there are many more than just one way to win, aka "be right."

Academic filmmaking expands these possibilities of critical argument-as-art. Grant (2016, para. 5) argues that audiovisual scholarship is "performative;" the works "accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects." These "effects" seem much wider than could be suggested by a "right answer." Such is clear in

Morton's (2017, 131-132) evident joy in how the two *[in]Transition* peer reviewers for Nick Warr's (2016) videographic piece "Honolulu Mon Amour" diverge, with Christine Becker responding largely to "its juxtaposition of works on very different rungs of the cultural taste hierarchy" and Gordon Hon responding more along the lines of Warr's own stated intentions. *[in]Transition*, the most prominent peer-reviewed media studies journal for videographic criticism, endorses this multiplicity of interpretation at an institutional level by not only publishing the author's essay and statement but the two peer reviews as well.

To Morton's (2017) identification of documentary filmmaking and avant-garde art as forerunners of videographic criticism, I (like Morimoto (2016), Stein (2019), Coppa (2022), and Garwood (2022)) would add the popular, vernacular practice of fannish video-making, alternatively called vidding, anime music video editing, or simply editing, depending on the fandom. Fannish videos "construct or emphasize feelings and emotions" as well as responding to "the critical/analytical impulses that cause vidders to want to remake television" (Coppa in response to Morimoto 2016). They do this in a plethora of sub-genres but very often with an editing style built on synchresis, or "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears at the same time" (Chion 1994, 224). The effect is both one of the mind—forcing you to reconsider the images and the sounds in light of each other—and one of the body—you are affected, emotionally, by the experience, which produces its own kind of knowledge. Fans tend to use popular sources, but the same effect is in virtuosic display in Catherine Grant's (2015) videographic piece "Carnal Locomotive," which uses kinetic typography and slow-motion in conjunction with the "propulsive rhythmic 'feel'" of the song "Hallon," by Christian Bjoerklund to analyze *Le Jour et l'heure (The Day and the Hour)* (dir. René Clément, 1963).

By expanding critical argument into the realm of multiple, subjective interpretations, however, we are also challenging one of its (previous) core tenets: that everyone can "get it." Experiential affect is binary—you either feel something or you don't. When it comes to audiovisual works, that feeling is heavily impacted by taste. As Wilson (2014) puts it, "When you hate a song, the reaction tends to

come in spasms. Hearing it can be like having a cockroach crawl up your sleeve" (p.3). Scholars often have more esoteric tastes, which might be one reason why pop songs are so rare in videographic criticism, despite the example of fannish video-making and the way "the critical, transformative and affective qualities of this music-led form seem perfectly matched with the values that inform videographic criticism" (Garwood 2022).

In the accompanying video essay, I argue that as scholars we must train ourselves to "feel" past these instinctive reactions, to open our hearts in the same way as we are traditionally trained to open our minds. I do this by first demonstrating two different approaches to making audiovisual scholarship about the internet video genre of *Minecraft* Survival Multi-Player (SMP) series. The first excerpt is straightforwardly explanatory, using video-making as a medium for the dissemination of research results. The music is instrumental and was originally created as a soundtrack for the landmark anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (dir. Kunihiko Ikuhara, 1997)—I want it to evoke the postmodernism that the show is so celebrated for and which plays a key role in my argument. The second excerpt is almost fully poetic in the fannish tradition and imports the pop song "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen as a text to think-feel with about the SMP series. I say "almost" because I've added some signposts explaining why I made certain choices, clarifying the themes I'm exploring. But, as Keathley (2011) argues, "if the goal is still the production of some knowledge, the challenge for the 'digital film critic' is to situate herself somewhere in the middle of these alternatives, borrowing the explanatory authority of one and the poetical power of the other" (p.190). The third piece embedded in my video essay is an attempt at just this, importing Daft Punk's song "Technologic" while also putting forward a running critical commentary about the subject, the process of academic filmmaking itself. The song's driving beat and lyrics combine with sped-up screen recordings of my desktop to suggest that we need to be careful about how much we commit ourselves to filmmaking practice, lest it drain us dry of not only mental energy but also heart. Softening this is the evidence of scholarly community seen in the footage and reinforced by the written commentary, which can serve as a buffer against the relentless pace of contemporary academe.

But what might stand out most to viewers in the video essay is one of my framing devices: a hand-drawn (with crayon) version of the *Minecraft* interface. I customized it for the academic filmmaker, putting a desktop computer in the "offhand" where one keeps tools that should always be handy, and providing commands to media as well as buttons to bring up books, articles, other video essays, and suchlike. I wanted to leave my fingerprints all over the video, highlighting both the personal and subjective nature of this research process and its simultaneously deep imbrication with technological tools.

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Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice

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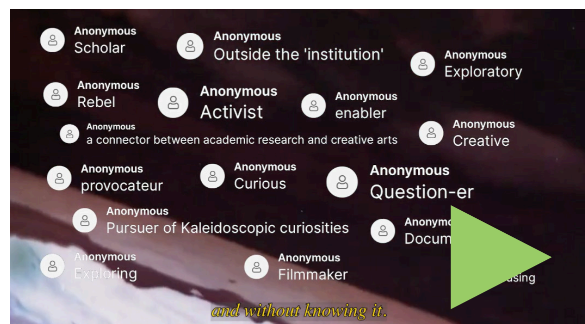
Jemma Saunders *is a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham. Her thesis explores screen representations of Birmingham, using videographic criticism as a core research methodology. She has published in Tecmerin Journal of Audiovisual Essays and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.*

Ella Wright *is a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham. Their thesis working title is "Half-essay, half-film: the search for concreteness in the video essay form". Their work was listed in Sight and Sound's "Best Video Essays of 2022", and they have been published in Viewfinder Magazine.*



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Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice

Nina Jones
Jemma Saunders
Ella Wright

Abstract

"Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice" comprises a triptych of video essays, crafted by the co-organisers of the inaugural B-Film Creative Practice Colloquium at the University of Birmingham. In each video, the creators reflect upon data collected during this event (including a videographic exercise, digital questionnaires, and filmed interviews). Through analysing how attendees described and executed their practice and methods, the three videos jointly and separately interrogate:

- relationships of process and product in audiovisual research-by-practice;
- the place of experimental filmmaking in academia;
- opportunities for, and impediments to, the adoption and development of filmmaking in the academy.

These works have a specific focus on postgraduate researchers and thus may provide guidance for both supervisors and future students working in creative practice research.

Keywords: audiovisual methodology, doctoral students, creative practice, practice research, filmmaking, academic identity.

Introduction: The Colloquium

The three video essays that form "Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice" are crafted by the co-organisers of the inaugural B-Film Creative Practice Colloquium at the University of Birmingham. This hybrid event in June 2023 explored identities and methodologies of creative practice researchers across a range of disciplines, with a dual focus on PhD students and on fostering a community of practice. Over twenty people attended, with online attendees from countries including Israel, Denmark and the USA. Questions were asked using the digital interactive meeting tool Slido, with answers functioning as provocations for discussion around the terminology used to describe participants' identities and methodologies within their spheres of practice. The keynote address, delivered by Dr Richard Langley, reflected on the numerous audiovisual theses he

has supervised and their need for methodological underpinning. A practical exercise encouraged participants to reflect on their personal methodologies by creating an audiovisual piece of work inspired by a prompt artefact, chosen by Dr Langley (Warwicker 1993), culminating in a group screening and final discussion.

We recommend "Academically Insane" as an apt starting point for viewing these video essays, followed by "Without Knowing It" and finally "Joining the Dots". The co-organisers' reflective written statements, within the contexts of the event and wider academia, provide individual commentaries on these works before joint conclusions are deliberated.

"Academically Insane" (Nina Jones)

The documentary piece "Academically Insane" provides a space where the colloquium's immediate impact can be observed. Contributors contemplate self-perception within the creative practice ecosystem, as well as how they are perceived by wider academic communities. Through an interview-based narrative, it captures intimate moments, delving into participants' experiences and emotions. By placing contributors centrally within the frame, directly engaging the audience by looking down the lens, the piece explores complex themes such as legitimacy, human nature, and the concept of otherness.

The filmmaker blends data from prescribed exercises and observational footage to create a forum where individual voices resonate independently and as a collective. The questions posed in the interviews emerged organically, stemming from informal interactions, observations, and the connections that developed throughout the colloquium.

The documentary's introduction is marked by George's provocative proclamation: "It's a self-help group for the academically insane… there's the fringes [*sic*] and then there is us." His words suggest that those engaged in practice-based research inhabit a world that is distinct, as if they embody an otherness. This concept proposes a departure from established paradigms, thereby engendering discussions pertaining to the nature of this otherness and its implications.

It also interposes inquiries concerning the realm that extends beyond known research peripheries. Cormac postulates: "Is anyone

else at my institution interested in what I do?" He intimates that his community, defined by videographic practice-based methods, and evolving from a pandemic-induced connectedness, provides a sanctuary for kindred peers. These communities offer a sense of solace; they beckon towards the potential of forging connections that transcend the boundaries of established groups and invite collaboration outside of film practice. In parallel, Sharon suggests that the beauty of creative practice lies in its propensity to elevate fundamental human attributes, thus "making us a better human being... when someone else sees it [the product(s) of our creative practice] and engages". She underscores the pivotal role of inviting participation from beyond the academic sphere, proposing it as a crucial ingredient for enduring influence.

Overall, "Academically Insane" navigates these intricate themes, encouraging contemplation about the intersections of identity, creativity, and academia.

"Without Knowing It" (Ella Wright)

> […] the rule of the philosopher's discourse has always been to find the rule of his/her own discourse. The philosopher is thus someone who speaks in order to find the rule of what s/he wishes to say, and who by virtue of that face speaks before knowing the rule, and without knowing it. (Lyotard 1989, xv)

The above quote from Lyotard, utilised in this video, exemplifies one of the conclusions that was drawn from the colloquium: that, ultimately, the rule of the creative practitioner's discourse is to find the rule of their own discourse, and to accept the potential impossibility of discovering said rule. Following that, fundamentally, the creative practitioner must create and live in the space of finding, of not knowing.

This video's primary focus is on the emotional resonances that lingered for this author after the colloquium. Predominantly, the prevailing sentiment was a sense of ontological uncertainty, coupled with a potential discontentment concerning the perception of creative practice within the academic sphere. Who are we? The answer, as seen through the statements submitted by attendees through the

digital questionnaires, is wide-ranging: scholar, explorer, provocateur. Where do we sit within our communities, if we feel we have any, and likewise within the academy? Again, the answer appears to be non-definitive (if leaning towards the negative). So how would it be possible to make a video essay leading towards any decisive argument, when the day itself provided no clear conclusions? Participants were simply left with a feeling: of gratefulness for the space to communicate with fellow human beings, of the wish that ourselves and our work (often intertwined) could be seen and appreciated, and of the need for connection free of politics. This is what this work attempts to convey.

"Joining the Dots" (Jemma Saunders)

A need for and sense of connection were integral to the creation of this video, which documents the maker's exploration of her own methodology and identity, in light of encounters with both the audiovisual artefact and the community of researchers at the colloquium. Through the practical exercise mentioned in the introduction, above, it became apparent that everyone projected elements of their own research onto the artefact, imbuing it with meanings that were not always apparent to others, via manipulation, sound, or integration of other materials. So it is, as in the film *Dragonheart* (shown in the video), when we look "to the stars" (Cohen 1996), inserting invisible hyphens to join these dots in myriad ways, creating stories with distinct personal resonances. The cacophony arising from the juxtaposition of participants' exercises reflects the maker's own conflicted sense of identity, simultaneously demonstrating the range of processes at play in this experimental exercise.

McFarland (2011, 474) asserts that "As a metaphorical vehicle, the word 'constellation' invokes an outdated cosmology of concentric spheres; astral constellations themselves appear as planar arrangements of what are, in reality, widely dispersed astronomical bodies in the depths of universal space". This indicates how human instincts to make meaning sometimes transcend logic, but we continue to seek connections nonetheless. This video contends that videographic criticism brings seemingly disparate elements into meaningful cohesion, and that forging links with others who work within the realms of audiovisual creative practice is a way of seeking reassurance as to our academic validity.

As in "Without Knowing It", definitive conclusions remain elusive, yet err towards embracing the multifaceted, fluctuating elements that make a person who they are, acknowledging the impact of each element on how and what we create as practice-researchers. Drawing, quite literally, on Dr Langley's propositions about hyphenation, "Joining the Dots" is intended as a manifestation of the creator's thought processes around their approach to audiovisual research and their tentative identity within academia.

Conclusions

Each video and statement attribute value to the place of experimental approaches within academic filmmaking, not least for the opportunity to identify distinct methodologies. Though created individually, it is telling that they are thematically similar (largely reflecting on connection), and that they deploy many similar elements from the day. Therefore, as these three videos work interdependently, as well as functioning as three separate entities that can be viewed alone, "videographic triptych" seems an apt term to describe them (despite the religious connotation). Indeed, this term has precedence in videographic work, one example being "Mobilizing Women In a Few Easy Steps! (A Feminist Triptych)" by Melissa Dolman, published in *[in]Transition* (Dollman 2023).

Affording participants the time and space to experiment during the colloquium was universally welcomed. Everyone suggested that working with an abstract prompt forced them to consider the ways in which they approached their research, with many exploring their subject areas in new ways. Notably, it transpired that all attendees had to either put aside another part of their identity to take part in the colloquium or could not attend in its entirety because of other responsibilities. We highlight this to emphasise the importance of acknowledging the self within creative practice research. Whether through insertion of voiceover, editorial choices, camera angles, or other creative decisions, personal insertions are present across our triptych, and in all attendees' responses to the artefact.

While many participants felt part of a wider network of creators, whether from professional industry backgrounds or within the academic videographic community, most averred that a network of doctoral researchers employing audio-visual methodologies was lacking and that, institutionally, there was little support or under-

standing for their distinct creative praxes. While it is acknowledged that imposter syndrome and isolation are common feelings experienced by PhD students in all disciplines, it appears those engaged in practice research remain in a minority at their institutions. This fact may be central to the exacerbation of the feelings documented here, perhaps especially so in the UK context. The prevalence of the response "isolation" in the Slido questionnaire points to a need for greater support for doctoral students in particular, the lack of which may be inhibitive to future growth of academic filmmaking. This tangible sense that we must justify ourselves and our work as legitimate research could, therefore, benefit from what Barrero-Fernández et. al. (2023, 261) term "'Educational Constellations,': macro-networks that generate links between schools and different types of institutions as an essential tool for educational improvement." At the risk of overextending the metaphor explored in "Joining the Dots", there is a wish to have an impact beyond our own small constellation, a term which could, in fact, be used instead of triptych to describe the three videos presented here, as well as the related audiovisual work created during the colloquium. Indeed, the concept of constellation as a way of theorising practice-based research merits further exploration and expansion in future work, beyond the scope of this publication. The Creative Practice Colloquium is, we hope, a starting point for such Educational Constellations to be established and further traversed.

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Consent was obtained in writing for the reproduction of faces, voices and created materials that have been (re)used in this submission.

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Identities and Methodologies of Doctoral Candidates Undertaking Audiovisual Research-by-Practice

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Academic filmmaking and its discontents

In between videographic criticism and visual anthropology

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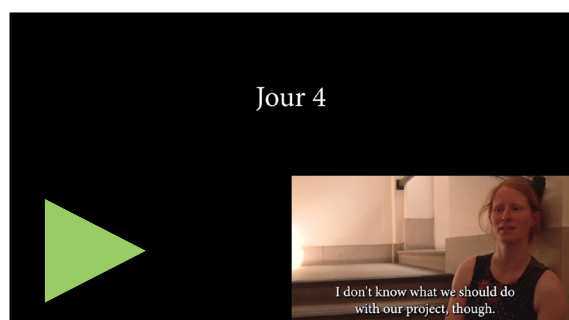

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Abstract

Working with the same filmed material from the perspective of anthropology and screen studies, the authors discuss their disciplines' different approaches to academic filmmaking. This article presents two videos, *Filming Out Loud* and *Whose Stories*, made from the same raw footage shot by the two authors together at the garage

Cedric Motors, situated close to Manchester University, UK, where they were taking a summer course in ethnographic filmmaking at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in June 2022. After spending seven days at the garage, filming the workdays of the owner Pat Rafter and his main employee (who wishes to remain unnamed), this raw material was then edited separately by each author. Producing points of methodological comparison between videographic criticism working with "an archive of moving images and sounds" (Keathley and Mittell 2019) and the culturally situated "encounters with alterity" enacted through ethnographic filmmaking (Cox et al. 2016), the authors engage with the methodological differences and commonalities between their two disciplines and filmmaking practices. By focusing on how the unpredictability of ethnographic fieldwork generated a rethinking of received conventions, interdisciplinary collaboration in visual research is here framed as an opportunity for a "transmutation of sensibilities" (Csordas 2007) bringing into question both videographic criticism's imperative of critical thinking articulated audiovisually (generally on archival material) and visual anthropology's observational legacy. Scraping at the weld between disciplinary received knowledge, the authors reflect on the positionality and ethics of their research and on the task of elaborating a filmic narrative while accounting for different social or cultural worlds.

Keywords*:* Visual anthropology, videographic criticism, filmmaking ethics, performance in practice-based research, interdisciplinary collaboration

Guiding text

Working together at a summer course in ethnographic filmmaking at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at Manchester University in the hot month of June 2022, our journey together as researchers in film and media studies and visual anthropology began when, wandering around the outskirts of the city in search of a film subject, we stumbled upon a garage and became fascinated by the bodily relationship between its workers and the imposing materiality and soundscape they were immersed in. Slowly introduced to a socio-spatial landscape virtually unknown to us, a sustained shared attention initially kept our camera attached to the rhythmicity of

processes enacted and reenacted multiple times – the replacement of wheels and gears, the workings of vertical lift bridges – as well as to their visual and sonic details, thus allowing us to grapple with the potentiality of the camera in aiding our training to specific "ways of seeing" (Grasseni 2004). As we got increasingly acquainted with the material and human subjects of our research – the owner of the garage Pat Rafter and a young mechanic (who wishes to remain unnamed) who had been on duty throughout the seven days of shooting and with whom we had formed a closer relationship – questions around the authorship of representation and its methodological and ethical implications steadily gained weight in our conversations, thus enlivening dormant tensions between our respective disciplinary orientations and assumptions. These moments of sometimes heated exchange took on a new and acute significance when our main subject declined our request to sit down for a formal interview, which was a formal requirement for the course. This fieldwork upturn enabled a reflexive rearticulation of the ethical tensions between the fulfilment of an ethnographic duty towards a hypothetical audience – materialised in the effort of producing a filmic output at any cost – and that towards the people we encountered in the field, thus stimulating lively discussions about the objective of our film.

CLGM: Behind what we initially perceived as a threat to our authorship began to grow a realisation that the headwinds confronting our will to understand and portray the alterity of third "Other" were offering us some cautionary lessons on what I believe might have been the major findings of our fieldwork: that is, the possibility of an encounter between our respective "skilled visions" (Grasseni 2004) as filmmakers and what the fieldwork had to offer us. Such critical juncture brought us to sit down to a formal auto-interview in an attempt to reposition our own authorial subjectivities as also subjects of research. This crisis of authorship also made us more receptive to what Thomas Csordas (2007) has defined as "transmutation of sensibilities" – moments of ethnographic practice that allow for "intuition for a way of life" belonging to a socially and culturally diverse "Other" – and thus to the ethnographic places our fieldwork was leading us, which beautifully refused the script we wanted to impose on them.

MC: Our main divergences indeed touched upon the processes behind how to do justice to both our subject's and our own "ways of seeing" without the words of our subject appearing in the final film. We questioned the ethics of the formal manipulation of footage, pressing our subject to sit down for an interview, or the possibility of creating an auto-ethnographic product. The idea of making two different edits from the same footage arose as a way of evoking our disciplinary contents and discontents. The resulting videos account both for the difficulties we had in creating a filmic object within the tradition of visual ethnography. as the course demanded in such a short amount of time, and for the transmutation of sensibilities that happened during this time between us and our subjects of research (the young mechanic and his working environment).

CLGM: Anthropological filmmaking has widely come to be recognised as a powerful tool for evoking performative and thus transformative experiences of both the subjects present in the field and the audience of the film. As the medium of the camera allows for places of social and cultural imagination to connect within and across the field (Pink 2015), it enlarges the range of conceivable modes of living that the subjects involved in the film can articulate. While visual anthropology might still be less attuned than videographic criticism with experimenting with different genres, recent lines of inquiry in anthropology have begun to call attention to the employment of more impressionistic, performative and experimental elements in ethnographic filmmaking (Anderson 2016, Suhr and Willerslev 2012). Rather than falling back on the assumption that the implementation of techniques such as unusual framing, contrasting juxtaposition of shots, extradiegetic music and voiceover would necessarily push our visual material to the "fiction-end" of an imaginary ethnographic documentary spectrum, these approaches remind us that we should be weary of totalising tendencies within the subfield and the discipline at large.

MC: The field of videographic criticism also undergoes continual transformations in how it approaches its subjects of research and formulates new knowledge. Somewhat similar to how anthropological filmmakers approach the field from their situated position, Chloé Galibert-Laîné describes performance in the making and screening of audiovisual essays as generating bodily encounters between researchers, viewers and the subject of research, and these

encounters as producing creative knowledge (2020, 5). My use of splitscreens in *Filming Out Loud* aims to reflect this transformative experience, which you also evoke in the filmic encounter between the camera and the different bodies present. The three frames in my video aim to show how new and affective knowledge arises from the intersubjective dynamics that were at play between the three bodies present in the field of research: the garage's and its material and sonic environment, the young mechanic's, and our own researchers' bodies (entering the frame sometimes indirectly through the physical presence of the microphone). For Catherine Grant, the audiovisual essay functions as performative research which produces affective forms of knowledge and "generate[s] effects" in the viewer (2016, 256). The visual, physical and aural repetitions across the three frames aim to raise a question affectively; of whether the sharing of a common temporal and sensory experience can create a transmutation of sensibilities between the mechanic's and the filmmakers' different bodies and labour situations. And in turn transform and merge ideas of authorship and otherness.

CLGM: While substantially departing from the canon of observational documentary (Henley 2007) in its use of camerawork, non-synchronous sound and extensive use of editing, the first two minutes of *Whose Stories* still stand at the borders of conventional anthropological documentary. The general realistic overtone of the opening scenes in the video is then gradually interrupted in an attempt to unmask the contrived attempt to hide the presence of the filmmakers from the screen. The disruption generated by the noise of our microphones and subsequent introduction of our voices, rather than an explicative, omniscient voice over, are presented through a climax of disturbance – a proxy of the noise made by the attempt to establish an ethnographic and filmic authority by hiding it behind an observational script. Fiction – which is subtly present at both ends of the film through the image of the Mini car – is finally brought to an extreme through the introduction of extradiegetic music and of the two filmmakers as formal interviewees. While the first few lengthy shots of the mechanic at work are intended to generate an expansion of filmic time, the rhythm of the video is suddenly disrupted by the introduction of a quick succession of short, abruptly cut and speeded up shots that – in an almost irritating way – collide with rhythm of the extradiegetic music

introduced. Here, extreme time compression is designed to depict the anxiety of authorship generated by the filmmakers' frustration at the impossibility of hiding their presence and imposing a narrative line on the script at the same time. As this anxiety mounts up, it translates into a series of contrived attempts at rewriting the film's presumed vocation. Yet, it is exactly reckoning with this succession of failed attempts that allows the film to overcome its own climax, as the filmmakers eventually settle down to the "cathartic experience" of accepting the ethnographic richness of a failed attempt at portraying ethnographic wholeness.

MC: My main difficulty in the making of *Filming Out Loud* also emerged from the call (or obligation) to deviate from what videographic criticism usually does – critical thinking articulated audiovisually on archival material – and instead remain faithful to a living subject's ways of seeing while expressing my situated researcher's perspective as I would with any other "archive of moving images and sound" (Keathley and Mittell 2019). This duality of processes between video essay making and ethnographic filmmaking forms the main topic of my audiovisual essay. The methodical organisation of the footage by day of filming – in the style of an auto-ethnographic diary – aims to document the processes (and difficulties) of taking an anthropological approach to filming a work setting. In a first iteration, the video-essay followed a strict algorithmic method (O'Leary 2019; 2021), working through cuts and superimpositions with the entirety of the filmed material. The repetitiveness of the visual and aural soundscape this task generated placed emphasis on the repetitive acts of labour and (re-)created an immersive sensory ambiance, which is precisely what attracted us when we first stumbled upon the garage. The division in days of filming and in three frames therefore results from a process of material thinking to "tell the story of a video essay from beginning to end, to try to re-create its creation" (in the words of Grant 2019). Grant explains that this may happen through looking into the "images of the void, the pause, and the interval" (2019, borrowing the words of Carlos Losilla). Similarly, our project does not attempt to show the socio-cultural world of a subject of research, but rather tell the story of work processes and of the pauses and intervals between the mechanic and the filmmakers.

CLGM: Practical interdisciplinary collaboration can be of the highest service to help complicate the fracture lines between ethnographic documentary and other genres of academic filmmaking. I have edited our raw footage for this issue of *Academic Quarter* in the hope it could serve as a window into a transformative experience that, besides carving a new space for interdisciplinary openness, has offered the material ground for rewriting the script of what I had since then considered to be the anthropological value of academic filmmaking. In order to portray these tensions, the structure of *Whose Stories* thus intends to depict two distinct narrative trajectories, one attempted and one inevitable.

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Attempting an Ontology of Participatory Film

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Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers *is Professor of Applied Anthropology at Bournemouth University. She has written on memory, stereotyping, and identity constructions in recourse to contested pasts after conflict and regime-change, and on transitional and epistemic justice within the asymmetric encounters of international interventions and development practices in her ethnographic research areas.*

Abstract

In this video-essay, participatory filmmaker, Paul Cooke, and social anthropologist, Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, discuss in detail images from two activist-focussed, participatory video projects Cooke has run with young people in South Africa and Lebanon. They ask whether participatory film can communicate their creators' activist intentions to audiences often far removed from the original context of production. They challenge themselves to answer this question by deliberately juxtaposing their respective disciplines' distinct philosophical approaches to ontology.

Bazin's foundational discussion of the ontology of the photographic image (as a universally relatable 'essence' encapsulated in the image) is juxtaposed with anthropology's 'ontological turn' (a radical cultural-relativist focus on people and contextually situated meaning). The video-essay reflects on whether the young participant filmmakers' aesthetic choices generate images which speak for themselves or, alternatively, whether the transfigurations these images undergo through different registers of representation and curation – as the films move from community showcasing event to international film festival or academic setting – change their originally-intended meanings. In identifying tensions between proximity and distance, intimacy and exploitation, the potentials and limitations of mediating local activists' voices to remote audiences through film is left up to the spectator for final arbitration.

Keywords: Ontology, participation, filmmaking, anthropology, development, activism

Introduction

Can participatory film communicate the intentions of those involved to audiences often far removed from the original context of production? In this video-essay, participatory filmmaker Paul Cooke and social anthropologist Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers set themselves an intellectual challenge: to answer this question by deliberately juxtaposing their respective discipline's distinct philosophical approaches to ontology (the way we know how things exist, in short: 'the study of being'). Their debate relates to Cooke's

participatory film projects with young people, worldwide, making films about their social environments.

While neither discussant would necessarily identify as 'ontologists' within their respective fields, this rhetorical experiment allows the juxtaposing of Bazin's (1945) ontological paradigm regarding the essence of an image, as such, with a heightened cultural-relativist focus on the involved people. A sharp contrast emerges: the former points to the representational power of an image as universally decodable trace of the profilmic real (Marks 2000, 93); the latter holds that meaning-making and interpretation is always contingent on a distinct historical context and, thus, culturally specific (classically, Geertz 1973). According to the former, participatory-film images speak for themselves; according to the latter, a remote audiences' lack of knowledge about the original context of film production might distort the young artists' and activists' originally intended messages. But should this even matter?

The video-essay is structured according to the iterative principles of a participatory project, with each section answering a key concern raised in the previous section. Part 1 introduces participatory film as a distinct mode. Part 2 explores Bazin's ontological paradigm, using his foundational text for discussions of cinematic realism (1945). Part 3 challenges this through an introduction to the anthropological concept of ontology and the anthropologist's spontaneous reactions to the footage in question. Part 4 features a debate between the two authors' positions. This debate is then tested out in Part 5 via a closing sequence of images (including further participatory projects Cooke has run that have not been previously discussed), intended to provoke the audience to contemplate its own convictions.

The video begins by delving into the history and aims of participatory filmmaking as a distinct mode of production. At least since the late 1960s, participatory filmmaking has served as a human-rights advocacy tool in community and international development practice. Participatory film-based development projects generally promote social justice aims, invariably seeking to amplify otherwise seldom-heard voices in the mainstream media. Through making films, participants have the opportunity to reflect their lives back on themselves, allowing them to gain new insights into the issues they face. At the same time, such projects are conceptualised as activist films designed to communicate local perspectives to

stakeholders that can support communities to effect change (Mkwananzi et al. 2021). But what happens when the films are taken out of this context?

As part of the development industry at large, participatory projects have often been criticised for being part of an agenda set by the Global North for the Global South, with 'participation' been read as a way of ensuring community-level 'buy in' (e.g. Bierschenk 2014; Grierson 2010; Newman 2011). The projects presented in this video-essay were explicitly set up to challenge this power dynamic. Cooke acted as technical facilitator, with no editorial control, to each project which was developed by, and for, participants. However, the video-essay also raises this broader critique in its presentation of these films within the context of an academic debate performed in the Global North.

The initial footage presented provides visual insights into Cooke's role of working with young local people telling their stories through films. Throughout, the footage emphasises the constructed nature of film representation, including 'behind the scenes' shots from selected participatory films authored by young people as well as from the filming of the video-essay itself. These shots are visually suggestive of what equitable cocreation, continuous critical self-reflection, and the facilitation of young people's self-directed voice and agency in such projects can look like in practice.

The sample footage and associated sound, which the video-essay presents and discusses with Cooke's former project participants' explicit permission, are their own artistic and aesthetic creations. The video-essay credits their authorship and ownership of their films. Telling their own stories, most of the young filmmakers chose a denotative style of communication (Cooke 2022) which, for outsiders, sometimes makes uncomfortable viewing, challenging Western audiences' ideas of propriety and evoking safeguarding calls.

Guided by the theoretical frameworks set up by the video-essayists, emerging questions include whether the images filmed, and the aesthetic choices made by the young filmmakers, can generate empathy true to their originally intended messages without additional contextualisation. By moving through different registers of representation and curation, from community showcasing event to international film festivals, or to academic debate, do the young art-

ists' messages become transfigured in ways which potentially challenge their creators' original intentions?

Bazin's ontology of the photographic image

Participatory film interventions rely on the power of film to communicate the reality of the lived experience of the communities represented on screen. This theoretical assumption is often seen as beginning with André Bazin's (1945) notion of film being able to capture the essence of the profilmic event far more accurately, and ultimately more powerfully, than any other forms of aesthetic representation. Film scholars and practitioners have long challenged this kind of assumption and pointed to ambiguities in Bazin's concepts of both ontology and realism. For example, predating Bazin, John Grierson famously declared documentary filmmaking as 'the *creative* treatment of actuality' (1933, 8, authors' emphasis). More recently, Smith (2013, 2) noted Bazin's actual allowance for the ambiguity of 'reality', and how this explains different styles of filmic 'realisms'. Others remain adamant that Bazin's ontology identified film language and aesthetics as communicating 'deep meaning', revealing 'a certain truth', which is associated with the purpose of 'cinema to reveal both the essence and the concreteness of the world' (Verano 2022, 410). By this token, for instance, Bazin commended a 'cinema of duration' (1967, 76). This aimed to achieve realism through long takes meant to facilitate 'a different kind of engagement of the audience […] to watch events unfolding and to interpret what they saw' (MacDougall 2019, 124).

Arguably, the filmmaker's long take of Aziza al-Zein's face discussed in the video-essay, with the camera resting on the woman's deep, expressive, facial lines that speak of suffering, just as much as her words and tears, also allowing for silences and hesitation in her speech, provide the viewer with an example of this kind of approach, as well as a strong experience of what has been termed haptic visuality (Marks 2000). The multi-sensory, affective, and embodied connection generated may mediate a sense of realism, perhaps in affirming universal human connectivity, but is this enough? Does a privileged audience's freedom for affective-empathic interpretation in the Global North of an artwork from the Global South do sufficient justice to its originally intended meaning and advocacy aims? Or, as the video-essay asks: does the audience get the message?

The ontological turn in anthropology

Anthropology's ontological turn shifts the focus away from Bazin's ontology of the image to specific people and how they conceptualise themselves and their environment in potentially fundamentally different ways than external observers are familiar with. This approach thus invites readers to radically rethink their embedded, universalising assumptions. A Brazilian anthropologist spearheading the turn, Viveiros de Castro, was fiercely criticised for implying 'radical alterity' (Graeber 2015) in his study of indigenous Amazonians' 'perspectivism' (a distinct ontology of humans, non-humans, and environmental relations different from our own; 1998; 2019[2004]). While at the radical end, notably another anthropologist facilitating local community film projects in the wider Amazonian region earlier, also found that distinctly different aesthetic conventions rendered some of the indigenous film stories autonomously produced incomprehensible to external audiences (Turner 1992, 8-10; discussed in Banks 2005, 35). Importantly, the anthropological ontological turn highlights the limits of our language in describing conceptual schema different from our own (Heywood 2023).

Less radical anthropologists of the turn such as Holbraad and Pedersen (2017, 13; who Schwandner-Sievers is shown reading in the video-essay) suggest that it simply intensifies the discipline's already existing concepts and methodological imperatives such as 'culture,' 'cultural relativism,' and critical 'reflexivity'. For anthropologists, 'cultural relativism' indicates a methodological and epistemological technique aimed at understanding different world views and perceptions from within their specific contexts and positionality, rather than a moral judgement about cultural difference (Brown 2008).

Accordingly, Schwandner-Sievers queries whether we can truly know the experience, world views, motives and intentions of the people filmed or filming them, outside their historical context and without an interpersonal conversation with them. For example, even if Aziza al-Zein's tears might evoke a sense of transcultural '*universality* of human experience', exactly '*through*' this film's particularity in '*re-presenting* experience' (Taylor 1998, 19; italics in original), shouldn't we recognise the limits of our differently situated interpretations and, thus, the empathy created (cf. Ramsbotham 2016; Gadamer 2010, 2013)? As we don't know the nature of al-

Zein's relation to the neighbours over whose tragic fate her tears fall, whether she witnessed or, perhaps, just heard, the story told, Schwandner-Sievers posits that 'these tears remain to a certain extent obscure unless we read [these] only very superficially through the prism of our own expectations and assumptions.'

Arguably, ethnographic films do 'not simply traverse cultural boundaries … [but] also transcend them,' exactly by 'evoking the universality of human experience' through their focus on the particular (Taylor 1998, 19). However, participatory film, although at times referenced in the literature (Gruber 2016), is not ethnographic film, as Cooke remarks in the video. Schwandner-Sievers insists that anthropology's ontological turn highlights an inherent challenge for activist film makers, if their participatory films aspire to communicate distinct, contextually-situated meaning across different registers of curation and representation: if communication is intended to exceed mere empathy creation, reliance on images alone, hence lacking interpersonal deliberations (e.g. at film viewings), might reduce the chances of strategically promoting the changes envisaged by the activists (cf. Ramsbotham 2016).

Conclusion

The conversation between the two ontological approaches described reveals the same aim of invoking a deeper understanding and communication between people facing differently situated realities. Yet the potentially universalising approach of cinema to provoke affective understanding through imagery alone contrasts with the anthropological focus on human diversity in specific historical contexts and the role of social interaction in communicating contextually-situated meaning. In alluding to the tensions between proximity and distance, intimacy and exploitation, the potentiality, and limitations of mediating local activists' voices and intended meaning through film alone is left up to the spectator for final arbitration.

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The Participants

Academic guiding text

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Abstract
While universities increasingly offer institutional support for academic filmmaking, in the specific case of ethics this support can sometimes become an impediment to creativity. The requirement to follow comprehensive university ethical procedures - which are usually developed with great care and attention to the needs of researchers but with little or no focus on creative practice research - might stymie the artistic practice of filmmakers. My video *The Participants: a reflection on the ethics of smartphone filmmaking as research* aims to offer a provocation intended to challenge university practitioner-researchers to consider the ethics of their practice, but also, at the same time, a provocation to university ethics protocols and procedures. Specifically, the films seeks to encourage the viewer to reflect on the ways in which filmmaker researchers working in in public places might better consider the ethical issues raised by their practice, especially when subsequently employing (and manipulating) footage of individuals who have not given their consent to be filmed. For *The Participants* I used an iPhone 11 to capture video images of tourists videoing with their smartphones at Grand Central Station, New York.

Keywords: Ethics, filmmaking, smartphones, documentary, creative practice

Guiding text
While universities increasingly offer institutional support for academic filmmaking, in the specific case of ethics this support can sometimes become an impediment to creativity. The requirement to follow comprehensive university ethical procedures - which are usually developed with little or no focus on creative practice research - can stymie the artistic practice of filmmakers. My video *The Participants: a reflection on the ethics of smartphone filmmaking as research* aims to offer a provocation intended to challenge university practitioner-researchers to consider the ethics of the practice, but also a provocation to university ethics protocols and procedures. Specifically, the films seeks to encourage the viewer to reflect on the ways in which filmmaker researchers working in in public places might better consider the ethical issues raised by their practice, es-

pecially when subsequently employing (and manipulating) footage of individuals who have not given their consent to be filmed.

For *The Participants* I used an iPhone 11 to capture video images of tourists videoing with their smartphones at Grand Central Station, New York (a major US tourist landmark). In the station I noticed what Timan and Albrechtslund term 'the recently ubiquitous presence of smartphones' (Timan and Albrechtslund 2015, 854). I was creatively inspired to video people videoing with their smartphones. On that day (8 October 2022), in that moment, at Grand Central Station, these participants were not aware of my aims for my footage, and I was not aware of their aims for theirs. At that stage, I had no intention of sharing my footage or developing it into a research video. I was merely inspired to video.

The Participants features an initial onscreen citation: "Every time a film is shot, privacy is violated." (Rouch 2003, 88). The film offers several more onscreen citations from key writers on filmmaking ethics. It draws on Calvin Pryluck's important, lasting work on ethics and filmmaking. For example, the video cites Pryluck's comment: "While one can argue about whether we can even know what really happens, inevitably in filming actuality, moments are recorded that the people being photographed might not wish to make widely public." (Pryluck 1976, 256). *The Participants* also cites the work of Brian Winston (2000, 158), who writes about four points to consider for "ethical risks" when documentary filming:

- What sort of person is being filmed? (That is, how well-known or public a personality?)
- How socially deviant is the action being filmed?
- How public or private is the location of the action?
- How widely will the final documentary be seen?

Jay Ruby also acknowledges the filmmaker's responsibility towards their participants (1988). But several other writers consider it to be impossible to inform potential participants completely about all risks involved in participating (see Becker 1988, Gross et al. 1988, Katz and Milstein Katz 1988, Nichols 1991, Pryluck 1976, Rosenthal 1988, Winston 1995, 2000). Michael Renov explores the tensions inherent in the "pitting of ethics against epistemology" (Renov 2004, 161). In bringing together ethics and epistemology,

Renov appears to recognise the fact that these are usually considered to be two distinct philosophical domains, and that ethics can sometimes be seen as constrainting epistemic activity. In the specific case of filmmaker researchers, ethical concerns might be a brake on creativity. Other writers engage with the issues raised by participants in films being unable to consent to their participation. For example, Garnet C. Butchart argues that "Because one cannot fully predict the reception of the final picture and therefore the degree to which participants will look favorably on their involvement, the only truth to be disclosed is the presence of the camera." (Butchart 2006, 444)

Timan and Albrechtslund helpfully argue, 'Once the record-button is pressed, one is in some form or another participating in surveillance by recording a human activity of that night out. Once material is shared, it becomes researchable and indexable by many other actors.' (Timan and Albrechtslund 2015, 856) I hope my video might contribute to existing research on the experience and influence of smartphone technology on public spaces, by reflecting thoughtfully on tensions between ethical concerns surveillance and the feedom to create (see Castells et al., 2007, Green 2002, Katz and Aarkus 2002).

My manipulation of the raw footage — and my specific employment of slow-motion footage and freeze frames at moments when participants on the station concourse notice me filming them — are designed to be provocative. It is hoped that these moments might facilitate a critical consideration of the ethical dilemmas of documentary filmmaking, and, in particular, of the limitations of participant consent. If the reaction of participants to being filmed depends on their nature of the relationship between filmmaker and subjects and on the degree to which they have been genuinely involved in the filmmaking process, then I would argue that my participants were no more aware of being filmed on the station on 8 October 2022 than I was. But I accept that the aestheticization of these images through the formal devices of slow-motion and freeze frame, and the sharing of this video online in an academic journal, certainly raise ethical questions.

I did not seek legal advice on making this video. However, on researching the legal ramifications of filming the public in the US, I discovered that filming people in public without intent to use the

footage for commercial use is generally legal in every state in the US, including New York. The Grand Central Station website currently (January 2024) states:

> Anyone is free to take pictures or video with a handheld consumer camera inside Grand Central Terminal. However if you will be using professional equipment, like a tripod, light, or stabilizer, or if you will be using the content for commercial purposes, you must complete this Permit process to file a Grand Central Terminal Still Photography/Film Permit Application. The Film Office issues permits to productions filming on location in the City of New York and provides free police assistance, free parking privileges and access to most exterior locations free of charge. Not all filming activity requires a permit. (https://grandcentralterminal.com/filming-photography/)

There is no legal protection where there is no reasonable expectation of privacy. Filming people in the US is a matter of state law, not federal law. But to date, no state has successfully made a law that makes the practice of filming the public illegal without immediately facing First Amendment free expression challenges. The only prohibitions that appear to be in place for filming the public in the US occurs where people have a legal "expectation of privacy" (dressing rooms, bathrooms, locker rooms, etc.).

Through undertaking this research, my overall position on the ethics of filming people without their consent — especially with a smartphone — has come to chime with Alan Rosenthal's point as articulated as follows (and cited in my video): "the essence of the question is how filmmakers should treat people in films so as to avoid exploiting them and causing them to have unnecessary suffering" (Rosenthal 1988, 245). Similarly, I agree with the academic filmmaker Catherine Gough-Brady (2022), who has recently made a sensible argument about her own research practice: "As a documentarian, my ethical focus was on those on the other side of my lens, and I adhered to that adage of 'do no harm' that Patricia Aufderheide, Peter Jaszi, and Mridu Chandra found is common among documentary filmmakers (2009)." But I repeat that the purpose of my video is less to demonstrate these ethical positions than to offer

a provocation to university practitioner-researchers to consider the ethics of the practice, and to university ethics committees to consider the agility of their protocols with regard to the actual conditions and uncertainties of creative projects.

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Present Bodies. Emancipated Voices

Or, how to relocate bodies in thought

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Abstract

This video essay is the result of a co-creation process carried out for six months with vulnerable teenagers who participated in a film workshop informed by a communitarian feminist epistemology in Toro, Colombia. Our aim, as co-creators of this process, is to collectivize the potencies of an emancipatory thought through images, sounds, and words in the face of gender-based violence that continues to take place in Latin America, particularly in the small city of Toro (a marginalized town witness to the violence resulting from drug trafficking). We also aim to affirm academic filmmaking as a propitious space for the consolidation of a material thought that relocates the body to the center of its motivations and movements. Our ambition has been to affirm academic filmmaking as a gesture of social justice, as well as a way of revitalizing and decolonizing the university.

Keywords: Counter-images, Body-territory, Menstruation, Gender, Violence

Guiding statement

1

In this video essay, we wanted to gather everything that happened in a collective workshop of experimentation and filmmaking based on the gender-based violence experienced by the participants, who are also co-authors of this piece. It becomes necessary to address the problem of gender-based violence –in any of its modes of thought, including as it is expressed in filmmaking—in the university sphere. To do so, we invoke the thought of Rita Segato (2016) who argues that the way to end patriarchy is by dismantling the pedagogy of patriarchy, since it is this that makes war. This experience of war is what the workshop participants have lived, as their bodies have been damaged, abused, and in other cases disappeared. And following Segato, without gender peace, there is no true peace. To achieve this peace, there must be more academic research based on listening to the body (which filmmaking has allowed). In this sense, for this proposal we opted for the pedagogy of "radical tenderness" (d'Emilia and Chavez 2015) that contributed to deconstructing and resignifying the interaction with our body-territories and the way

of naming our body parts, distancing us from a whole colonial and patriarchal system. Therefore, not only was the vulva talked about by the workshop participants, but also images of the vulva were sewn, as well as images of the breasts and the uterus. From the elaboration at the collective workshop of these material creations, we discussed concepts that are brought here to the university in a lively way through academic filmmaking.

All this to say, that this way of making the participants part of a process of emancipatory creation, where they became co-directors of the short film, helped to make a statement of the crimes that they have had to witness and the gender-based violence they have lived. In addition, this way of bringing academic filmmaking to them established in the creators a loving and empowering self-perception of themselves. At the same time, they reflected on the romanticized violence that stems from the abuse of the feminized body and the annulment of the experience of menstruating bodies. This last idea was constantly worked on by bringing exercises with the meaning of menstrual blood and the violated and stigmatized parts of those who have a uterus.

2

"Present Bodies. Emancipated Voices" is a video essay that is the result not only of the affirmation of audiovisual research-creation as a research method but also the result of the affirmation of experimental film as a field of emancipatory and decolonial encounter between the arts, gender studies, and feminist direct political-aesthetic actions (Vasconcellos and Pimentel 2017). The video essay is a political and artistic gesture that seeks to reinvent ways of communicating and perceiving what is usually invisibilized and silenced as is the woman's body and the fact of menstruation. This video essay is, in a way, the final link of a more complex counter-hegemonic ecology of community pedagogies of radical listening (Wiedemann 2021a) and tenderness (d'Emilia and Chavez 2015). A series of gestures in favor, on the one hand, of an epistemological turn in which the body is relocated in the center of thought and, on the other hand, in which the image becomes the embodied space of the experience of resisting gender-based violence suffered by the co-creators of this piece. These co-creators are nine teenage girls

and one adult woman, who participated in the workshop of audiovisual co-creation and emancipatory thought "Images and counter-images of the body-territory in menstruating corporealities," carried out at Toro – Colombia (a marginalized town on the outskirts witness to the violence resulting from drug trafficking) in 2022 within the framework of the CineToro Experimental Film Festival.

This creative process was possible thanks to activities that were carried out for six months in which two film forums were held with the theme "Emancipation among vulvas" entitled: "Recognizing ourselves: between hormones and blood" and "The power of knowing each other." In the screenings, we watched feminist short films of experimental animation and a documentary that served as a critical inspiration for the creation processes. Subsequently, the co-creation workshop took place for a total of forty hours, where textile and craft materials were made for the short film (vulvas, wombs, breasts, faces, hair, silhouettes, patchwork quilt as background), which in formal terms sought to be as simple and effective as possible, not demanding technical skills from the participants, but activating cinematic thinking beyond technical know-how. In this way, the video essay is composed of overhead sequence shots in which the workshop participants perform with their hands the montage of their own bodies on a small scale, while we listen in voice-over to testimonies that are the product of letters they wrote to their "I" of the future. The short film as an audiovisual surface becomes a performative space of the coexistence of anonymous experiences, since we always see three sequence shots featuring images of bodies under construction at the same time on the screen. These images are accompanied by a voice-over that inhabits them and that is not anchored to any of the sequence shots that compose the ensembled image, since the singularity of one fragment reverberates in the collectivity of all of them.

Other activities were also carried out, a performance and an artistic exhibition, which helped to reinforce the resistance that these women were demanding in the face of the situation of gender violence. The aim was to support the accusations that the teenage girls were making in their schools against their teachers for abuse and harassment, bearing in mind that the context in which they live is very religious and characterized by drug trafficking, so people are

afraid to speak or make accusations for fear of being judged or disappeared, as has been the case of many of their acquaintances and family members. In this sense, the video essay is a political gesture and mode of radical and collective thought in the act (Manning and Massumi 2014), where "Present Bodies" is the presentation or declaration of what we are and the resistance to what we were told we should be. And "Emancipated Voices" is the path of resistance to the events and traumas experienced.

3

One might wonder if we have formulated the problem correctly when speaking of academic filmmaking (the subject of this special issue), as if the problem were the defense of a particular typology anchored and adjectivized in "the academic" which circulates in the space of the university. However, since what ought to be circulating in the university does not always, in fact, circulate, we have tried to invoke the fecundity and fertility of new thoughts. Cinema has been called upon to integrate itself timidly and gradually into this "academic" ethos to revitalize what should have always been germinating. That is, the sparkling force of thought in action, the adventure of an 'all-alive-thought,' as a generative and creative potency and not as an argumentative and analytical exegesis that ultimately stops the movement of thought. An absence of movement –due to an absence of a body—is perhaps what has led filmmaking to be invited to appear at the university. Ultimately, we can understand this invitation as a gesture of care with thought, that leaves behind fused dichotomies and that starts from the affirmation that there would be no distinction between thinking and feeling and that thought is always in movement.

In other words, thinking is always a cinematic gesture. Thinking=movement=cinema. Thinking is the invention of relationships not given between heterogeneous elements as a gesture of montage in whose intervals a mobilizing force emerges in and from the living and matter. This cinema/filmmaking that takes care of thought by affirming itself in the presence of the body, makes explicit cinematic modes of experience (Wiedemann 2021b) that pass through the screen, but at the same time exceed it. That is to say, cinematic thought-movements pragmatically affirm lives,

since their primary place is not the screen but the bodies and the intervals that open up between them, making new perceptual fields emerge. This is what we have sought to do with the workshop of audiovisual co-creation and emancipatory thought "Images and counter-images of the body-territory in menstruating corporealities" that has given rise to this video essay "Present Bodies. Emancipated Voices," where singular bodies have made present a careful thought in alliance and resonance with the cinematic intervals that resist gender-based violence. In other words, we can understand this video essay as an embodied cinematic thinking in which cinema is a means to relocate the body in thought, by re-sensorializing and making material the montage-relations that assemble ideas and bodies that mutually potentiate each other beyond abstract and patriarchal logics. Ultimately, what we have sought to do is restore "adventures of ideas" (Whitehead 1967) by embracing their imminently cinematic and embodied condition, which, for lack of better words and in the spirit of revitalizing the university, we could call "academic filmmaking."

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Towards an Ecology of Practices in Academic Filmmaking

Speaking nearby Ana Vaz, Javiera Cisterna and Sofía Gallisá

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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